

cineACTION!

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

\$3.50
Spring '86
No. 5

alternative cinema



feminist
third world
underground
experimental



also: interview w/ arthur penn

CineAction!

No. 5, May 1986

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TYPESETTING: Excalibur Publications

PRINTING: Delta Web Graphics

Stills courtesy Ontario Film Institute, Picture Plant Ltd., National Film Board of Canada, and the individual authors.

CineAction! is published quarterly by the CineAction! collective. Single copy price is \$3.50; double issues \$7.00; subscriptions are available for four issues for \$12.00 (individuals) and \$25.00 (institutions); abroad, add \$2.00.

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ISSN 0826-9866

Second Class Mail Registration No. 7057
Printed and bound in Canada

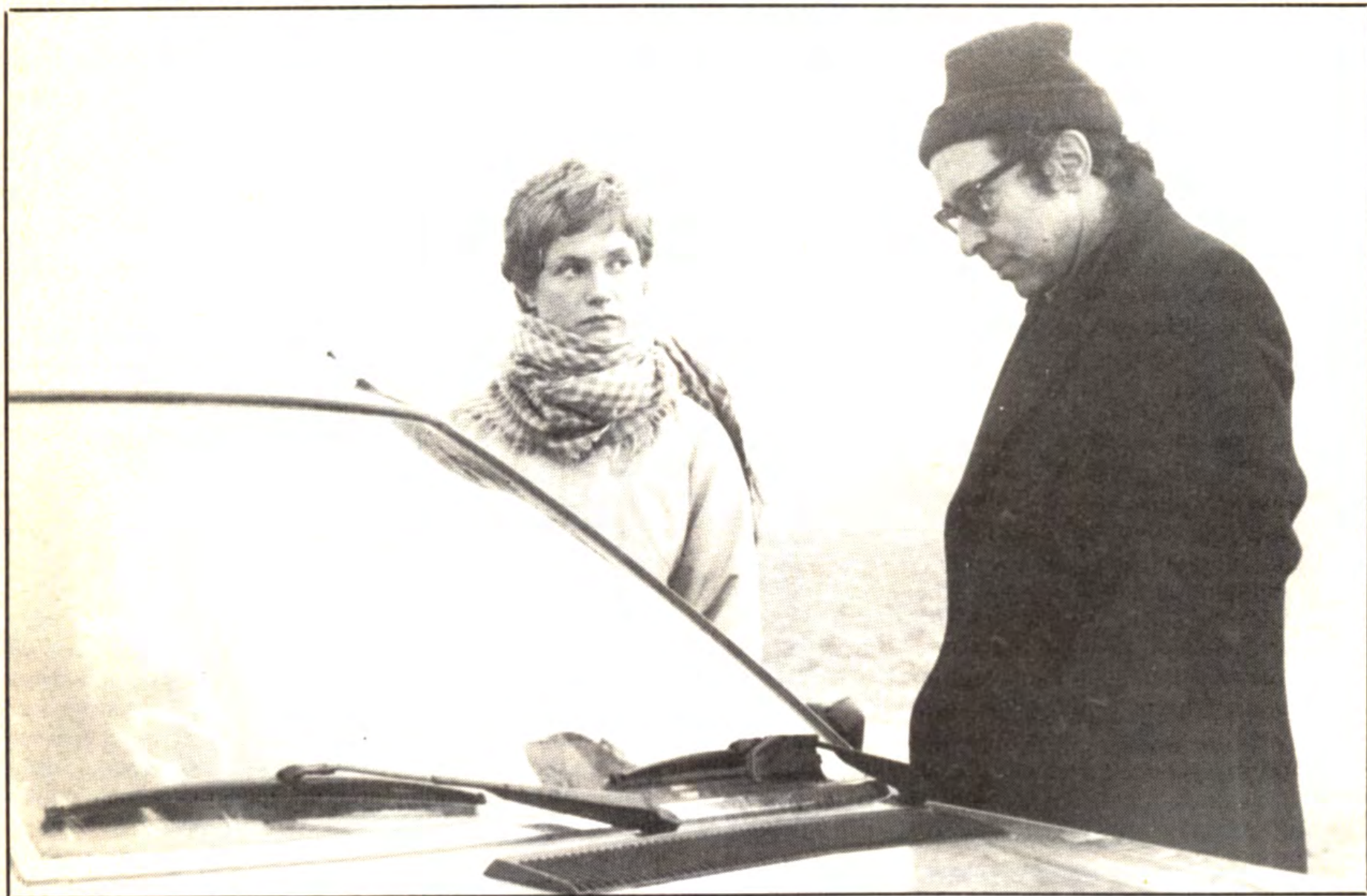
This issue was assisted by grants from the Explorations programme and the Writing and Publication Section of the Canada Council.

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Front cover: *Sans Soleil* (above) and *Aerial View*

Isabelle Huppert and Jean-Luc Godard on the set of Godard's *Passion*.



From the editors . . .

ALL OF THE FILMS DISCUSSED in this issue are from the spectrum of alternative films, from film-making practices operating outside of mainstream production. No specific political or aesthetic position defines these films; they may be considered to be experimental, feminist, documentary, structuralist, Marxist, narrative or some combination.

In each of these films there is a strong relationship between formal structure and politics or vision. If there is a connecting similarity, perhaps *Sans Soleil*'s intense refusal of closure is exemplary. Marker's film, with its deconstruction of traditional images and narration, leaves its viewers with a sense of both lost certainty and the potential of new vision, different history.

Variety and *Handtinting* each pursue different, and arguably feminist, searches for new relationships between the image, the narrative and the spectator.

Geographic origin, by itself, places films from

Cuba, Canada and Mexico outside dominant distribution. In addition, two directors are introduced with strong senses of social place and very different film-making strategies.

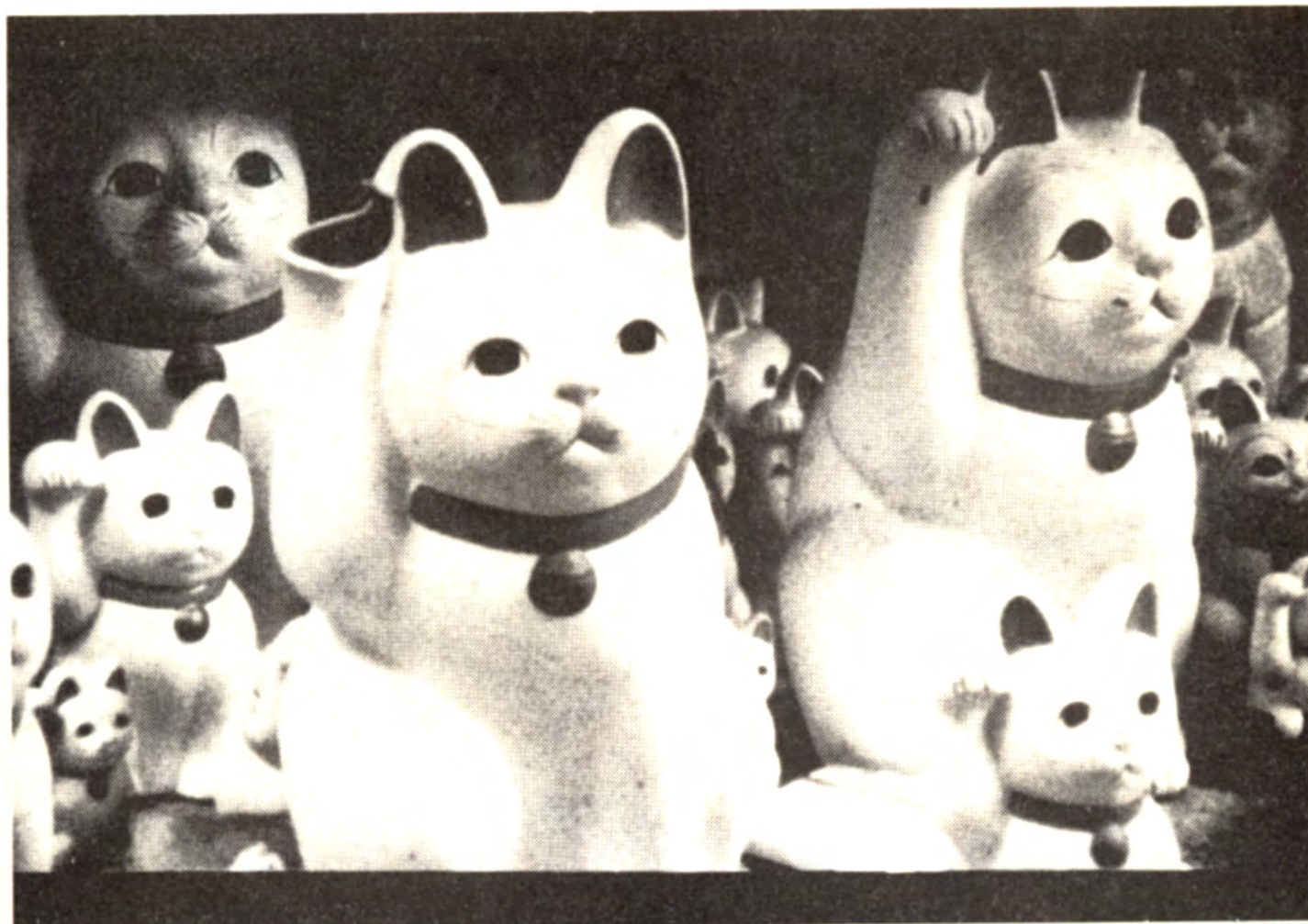
A discussion of the Cinema of Transgression takes us underground in New York to question the politics behind "shock tactics" in film.

We welcome reader's comments and criticism. In this issue, we publish a communication from Philip Corrigan and a response from Andrew Britton; readers may detect a continuation, among other subjects, of a discussion on the function of criticism.

Finally, an interview with Arthur Penn ranges over past and present Hollywood and dwells on the present limitations of the dominant industry which the other film-makers represented here operate outside of and, to varying degrees, against.

**Scott Forsyth
Maureen Judge**

SANS



SOLEIL

by Janine Marchessault

I am writing you all this from another world, a world of appearances. In a way, the two worlds communicate with each other. Memory is to one what History is to the other. An impossibility. Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable. Memories must make do with their delirium, with their drift. A moment stopped would burn like a flame of film blocked before the furnace of the projector. Madness protects, as fever does.

(Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil*)

Jean Rouch, noted for his ethnographic depictions, once spoke of those rare moments in film when without the aid of translation, the spectator suddenly comprehends an unknown dialect, participates in strange ceremonies, has a knowledge of towns and landscapes never before seen.¹ Rouch's remarks highlight the assumption, common to many a realist epistemology, that a language of universal signification, a language transcending all human barriers, capable of accessing the supratemporal essences of a common totality, can be located in and through the agency of film. Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (*Sun Less*, 1982) does indeed write from this agency—"another world"—whose material veneer is constituted in dislocated legends, shreds of fantasies and dreams, details from a favorite film, the banal spectacles of everyday existence in the third world (West Africa) and first world (Japan), three children on a road to Iceland in 1965. All these elements are rendered through the letters of a 'world traveller' in a blur of temporal landmarks which at times seem to resound with the familiarity Rouch describes. Yet *Sans Soleil* recasts this familiarity as phantasm, as the one twenty-fourth of a second frozen in the projector, condemned to the ashes of time, outside time—as impossible memory.

The complex interaction between memory and history is a concern which Marker has explored and extended over many years. As a member of the Left Bank² in the fifties, Marker, along with his friends Alain Resnais and Agnes Varda, was renowned for his short documentaries—film essays which explored in various hybrid forms the juncture between fiction and reality. *Lettre de Sibérie* (1958) for example, interrogated the relationship between sound and image, between point of view and image construction. By juxtaposing three different commentaries (reflecting three disparate world views: the Communist, the Socialist and the Capitalist) over the same series of shots, Marker demonstrated how sounds transform images, how ideologies manipulate cognition, how three separate narratives can be lifted from one visual context.

In *La Jetée* (1963) Marker transposed these concerns onto his own narrative in an attempt to distend and re-shape the cinematic contours of time and memory. Made-up almost entirely of still photographs, *La Jetée* relates the pursuit of an elusive childhood memory through past and future: a man is haunted by the image of a death he witnessed as a child—the death is his own. The movement of the film is engendered through a complex montage of 'memory moments' and through the circularity of the science-fiction narrative.

It is probably significant that Marker produced *Le Joli Mai*, considered by many to be his most straight-forward documentary, in the same year. Unlike many of his compatriots on the Left Bank, though equally aware of the contradictions underlying the 'committed' art work, Marker directed his efforts towards finding/formulating the intersection between the representation of politics and the politics of representation.

The events of May 1962 in France (the Solan trial, the OAS demonstrations) are said to have exerted a tremendous influence over Marker's subsequent work and it is probably this influence that informs *Le Joli Mai*. Combining cinema-verité type interviews—reactions to the events of May, with several strangely surrealistic images of Paris, the film typifies a desire to 'take to the streets' in the manner of a Dziga Vertov.

It is not surprising that four years later, just before the events of May 1968, Marker established the SLON group (Société Pour le Lancement des Oeuvres Nouvelles)³ whose first project was to produce *Loin du Vietnam* (*Far from Vietnam*, 1967). Marker invited various filmmakers (including William Klein, Joris Ivens, J.L. Godard, Claude Lelouch, Agnes Varda, Alain Resnais) to contribute an episode that would deal in some way with the situation in Vietnam. The result is a rich and invaluable catalogue of different approaches to political filmmaking, to 'making political films politically' as Godard has put it. Marker's own approach is inscribed in the very idea of the film, in bringing together variegated points of view on a political catastrophe in order to better understand it. In the juxtaposition of different approaches, Marker does not privilege any one position, but lets each stand in relation to the other, each episode collide with the next, commingle, intercept, restructure in a movement of *equalization*. It was this idea of equalization that inspired the SLON group to support and help foster a purely militant cinema—*by the workers and for the workers*. SLON encouraged the workers to establish their own cinema, to develop signifying practices that would best represent their collective interests. The idea was simple, change history by changing its writers. The program, however, met with varying degrees of success as many of the films merely reproduced the same oppressive structures of representation, the same bourgeois myths, without changing them.

The notion of equalization implies precisely a kind of polytheism, the introduction of multiple points of view which inundate the positivistic claim and render it ambiguous. It is in *Sans Soleil* that this process of equalization entertains the possibility of an entirely new conception of history: a history not founded on opposition but on *difference*. As such, *Sans Soleil* is not an alternative film traditionally elucidated in relation to and thus as a reaction against a dominant typology. Like Marker's earlier films it is a hybrid—a strange composition of nouveau roman and ethnographic document. In this way it defies boundaries, it resists categories because it is always neither one or both together; it can be described only as movement, as the very process of writing—as *écriture*.

Sans Soleil fully embraces Marker's concerns for the riddled interface between real and imaginary, between ideology and representation, between history and memory. Unlike his one time collaborator Resnais where the interaction between imaginary (-) and real (+) is cumulative, Marker never collapses the two terms; rather, there is always a social edifice operating outside the image—a *pre-text* from which the image is drawn. This notion of pre-text does not attend some theological parade of essences and origins but is highly material, ideological, reified; it is a concrete social reality. The image for Marker is a memory of the pre-text: "Legends are born out of the need to decipher the indecipherable." The documentation of different aspects of existence through mechanical reproduction is born from this same need: to *recover* what is forever lost, to uncover the secret structure(s) of the cipher, the pre-existent scheme of things. In *Sans Soleil* this need is referenced through a world traveller, a man of many worlds, Sandor

Krasna, whose letters written from far off lands are read on the soundtrack by the woman who (we suppose) is their recipient.

Krasna, for whom only the banalities of everyday life carry meaning, is in the process of making a film (this film?). Before the titles appear, over black leader a woman's voice addresses us directly:

The first image he told me about was of three children on a road to Iceland in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness and also, that he had tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked. He wrote: "I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader. If they don't see happiness in the image then at least they'll see the black."

The woman pauses before reading the second sentence as a golden hued image of three children on a road appears momentarily only to disappear into black. Is this the image of happiness? Or, is this a representation conjured up in the narrator's mind as she reads the letter? Or, is this Chris Marker's imaginary construction; are the narrator, Sandor Krasna, the image of happiness merely contrivances, ruses? This ambiguity is fortified by the insertion only a few frames later of the image of air-craft bombers, men and war machines getting ready to take off. The juxtaposition is startling and as with the previous image its origin is uncertain. While this image of war does in fact prove the difficulty in linking the image of happiness with other images, its presence is more than a simple demonstration as it is not called forth by the letter. The film's tension is rooted in the juxtaposition of these first two images and in the way the commentary interacts with but never completely controls them.

Sandor Krasna's wish is to have the image of happiness framed in black, standing as representation, taken to its most extreme point, polished and purified, shielded against any lexicographic intoxication. The difficulty of this endeavor is articulated through the presence of the war image: a meaningful danger, the danger of meaning, of the real, of the pre-text which is always inextricably bound up in the filmic ontology. The imaginary, the memory of happiness is never innocent.

Sans Soleil sets itself the task of fulfilling Sandor Krasna's desire to set the image free, to strip it of its pre-text and seal it into its own cognisance. From this process might emerge a new system of signification, not a new subjectivity but a radical (in every sense of the word) restructuration of objectivity. But how to go about this? How to forge an attack on the terror embodied in the silver protusions, the phallogocentric mechanisms of a war which has been determined in advance. Maybe the answer is in the darkness—"at least they'll see the black"—and perhaps the secret of the cipher is grounded in the enigmatic absence of a man named Sandor Krasna: Sans Or/Gold Less.

What if, as Nietzsche had insisted, the cipher is made up of mirrors which in essence reveal nothing, but maintain their chimera through defraction. What if the cipher is precisely that absence of quantity that the act of de-ciphering fills in. If this is so then the cipher is *sun less* and the act of de-ciphering its undoing in the fabrication of entities where nullity before presided. And if the act of deciphering is simply historicity exercising its structures over time, then the privilege, the preference, the selection, the sanction of one moment over another merely contributes to the construction of oppressive hierarchies—paradoxically false in the way that they affirm a univocal history. Indeed, the epistemic task of ordering and preserving corresponds to a desire to dominate and control: a "will to power", a will to combat the fear of darkness which is of course the absence of God. It is not difficult to understand how this 'will' operates the elaboration of hierarchies and the careful grooming of memory banks to support them. (This last

term is literal for in the Western World it is capital that weaves the webs of memory.)

Sans Soleil discredits any unitary narrative of history by introducing ambiguity into every last hiatus of its construction. The most readily discernible of these is, as noted above, that of the author—Chris Marker is credited with the conception and the editing of the film; Sandor Krasna is said to be the author of the letters; the narrator is acknowledged only for her reading when logically she is responsible for at least part of the script. Though the existence of Sandor Krasna is highly improbable, his mysterious absence, his relationship to the narrator and to the film as well as Chris Marker's own position in all this, serve to carve a productive uncertainty into the flow of predominantly documentary images: where is their point of origin? As in *La Jetée*, the film is premised in a large way on the complex interplay of temporalities which multiply and erode any one origin on the continuum. In the absence of our world traveller, a woman reads the letters he has sent to her in order to describe him to us, to de-cipher him, to re-instate his presence. Her attempt to do this, however, engenders a rather odd confusion—where does she begin and where does she end. Like the secret of the cipher, she is reflected, is part of, is exactly what she deciphers. It becomes increasingly difficult as the film unfolds to separate the narrator's qualifications—"he used to like to, he told me the story, he wrote me"—from Sandor Krasna's letters which are all written in the first person. For example, the narrator recalls: "He told me the story about a dog Hachiko: a dog waited every day..." The story is accompanied by the image of a statue of a dog in Japan, presumably the dog of the story. The legend is related to us directly by the narrator, or is it Sandor Krasna? The complicated interpolation of voices, like disembodied echoes, fades into one *impossible narrator*, at once sender and receiver: a circle.

The image track adds another impossible temporal dimension to the film. For the most part Sandor Krasna's letters precede the images or coincide perfectly. The statue of the dog, for example, corresponds to the story, we therefore assume that it is Krasna's image. Logically this is not possible, because it is the narrator who dictates the order in which she recalls Krasna and different parts of her narration lie outside the realm of the letters (for example, the story of the dog is one he told her and is not part of a letter); they are her memory of him. Logically there are two films, the one film that Krasna is describing in his letters and *Sans Soleil* which can only be seen as a kind of homage to this first film, as its' duplication. But as with the voice(s), the two films fall into one; they are merged through the images which work to frustrate the establishment of any one temporal position. The montage of images moves outside the realm of logical linearity and in this way deny the possibility of their own truth: "My personal problem was more specific: How to film the ladies of Bissau?...I see her—She saw me—She knows that I see her—...and at the end the real glance..." The images comply with the description which slides effortlessly back and forth between past and present. While at first it seems clear that the images precede the letters, this is undone for one short instant as a woman from Bissau stares directly into the camera. Her glance carries an unflinching immediacy which supersedes the commentary. Marker though, is well aware of the suturing effects of the *eye* which provided the locus for the only movement in *La Jetée* where the harsh flatness of a photograph dissolved into flux as a woman awoke from sleep, blinked from the past, from dream, from memory into the consciousness of the present: directly into the camera. The woman from Bissau crosses the same time barriers as she, the habitual recipient of the gaze, stares back into its face. Her image or rather the image of her asserts:



(not you are here but) 'I am here, wherever here is, in front of the camera.'

However and again, once this immediacy threatens to take over the film, to establish a set pattern of understanding, contradiction is re-introduced. Most of the images from West Africa and Japan are represented in typical ethnographic style—the camera is hand held, the cuts are rough. The images exert a certain fascination, they are full of movements, people, rituals, animals, images of images; they are full of culture and like the woman from Bissau, they carry an immediacy. But while the images are filmed in the manner of the direct cinema, the sounds which accompany them are for the most part abstracted; they are real sounds trimmed down to their minimal rhythmic components, at times coinciding exactly, strangely, with the images, at others pulling away from them completely. During certain segments the sounds fade into the background of the commentary, their synthetic quality barely audible; then suddenly they grow louder, and override the images—lacerating them, locking them into a kind of stereophonic simulacra. The pronounced absence of real direct sound transforms the visual textures into representational condensations which at times even the direct gaze could not pierce.

In order to close the circle of time properly, some of the images appear as flashforwards. In the middle of a neighbourhood ritual in Japan the image of a bird from the Ile de France is cut in; it is rapid and barely perceptible. Then only a few seconds later, the specular seal manages another momentary eruption—a man in a boat. Finally, once more the ritual is interrupted, this time by what is perhaps the more significant image of the three—a white man filming a black man (African) in the middle of some ritualistic trance. The three different images take on meaning as memory later in the film when they reappear. The circle is complete as the images invade the ritual briefly; the invasion is hardly noticeable until later when it is realized that they predicted the film—what was to come, already past, already in the past as representation. In the way these images confuse the order of things, so too is Marker—the expert shuffler of time—referenced by the third image, the man with a movie camera who reappears in different postures only three times throughout the course of the film. This very image highlights the ambiguity which underscores the entire film: who is behind the camera? The question, as with the representation, is always circular; it will always require the split. The image of someone behind a camera encompasses its own impossibility as a representation unable to access its origin, to invert its own process. This is true of all inscription, there is never any turning back on the 'Spiral of time.'

Sandor Krasna locates the Spiral in his favorite film, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. He sees the Spiral in the film's graphic motif; in Madeline's hair; in one man's *insane memory*, in his obsessive need to falsify a memory in order to live with it. Then it is Krasna himself who sifts through the locations of the film, hunts them down like Scottie searching for Madeline, only to find them changed or non-existent—the way Scottie finds Judy. It is Krasna who in his turn compares the stills from the film, moments in memory, with what is to us already another memory. In *Sans Soleil* temporal differences collide in an absence of order which leads to a leveling, a flattening out—the 'Spiral of time' ironed into a circle with no clear point of departure.

Two worlds are represented in the film: *two opposite poles of survival* which are as different from each other as they are from ours. Presented separately, these worlds would easily have served as quintessential images of Otherness; together they become images of difference. By juxtaposing West Africa with Japan without searching for possible homologies, Marker

achieves their equalization as representations. Crosscutting between a giraffe being shot in Africa and the death in Japan of a bear is not done for the sake of comparison but in order to gain insight into the idea of death. It is perhaps here that we might come to understand what Rouch called that 'impossible familiarity' achieved only in film, which he believed stemmed from the presence of a common humanity. What *Sans Soleil* is able to access are not the essences of a common humanity, but the desire for it, the desire that all legends from all cultures share: the desire to decipher the indecipherable. In this way every attempt is equally valid and like the Japanese who would have a sex shop and a church in the same building, so too do the many different rituals, different habits, different ways of existing, different ideas stand side by side as part of a horizontal list made up by Sandor Krasna of "things that make the heart beat faster." Each of these is torn from its original pre-text, reinserted and rearranged in a new combination. The effect of this exision is to empty each image of its symbolic residue—to dismember it, erase it and write it anew. The montage of images, sounds, and commentary are combined, alternated, re-distributed so that identities are not lost but merely transformed; proper names: three children on a road become an image of happiness. (As the film's epigraph from Ash Wednesday reads: "Because I know that time is always time and place is always and only place.")

The écriture which is 'sun less' traverses all categories, collapses hierarchies, constructs a space—a lacunary body—where third and first worlds can co-exist, where an image of happiness and an image of war, become just that—images. Krasna describes this area as the 'Zone', the world created through an image synthesizer: "My pal Hayao Yamaneko has found the solution: if the images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past." The images produced by the Zone "proclaim themselves to be what they are: images—not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality." These are the images of impossible memory resplendent with familiar legends. The Zone can accommodate multiple fictions—"a legend for every frame of film"; it is capable of embracing incommensurable forms of life. The eclipse produced through the Zone introduces the possibility of many suns, the shadows of many wills: a locus where hierarchical decrees no longer hold sway. The Zone suggests a new kind of objectivity, a new way of understanding representations and of constructing them as a challenge to the ossified fables of history.

It is only at the end of the film, after a long process, that Sandor Krasna's wish can be successfully granted: the image of three children on a road to Iceland in 1965, the image of happiness returns and is *grafted* into the film. But this only when the pre-text has been destroyed, when the image has been drained and all correspondences rendered impossible. Five years after it was filmed, a volcano erupted transforming the sunfilled landscape into a memory fragment *pure*: the image of happiness freed to float above the ashes of time.

And then in its turn, the journey entered the Zone; Hayao showed me my images already affected by the moss of Time, freed of the lie that had prolonged the existence of those moments swallowed by the Spiral.

NOTES

1. See *Positif* 3, Nov. 1955.
2. The Left Bank was the avant-garde centre in Paris; opposite the Right Bank, it also reflected a political position.
3. *Society for the Promotion of New Works*. For a more detailed discussion of SLON see William F. Van Wert, "Chris Marker: The SLON films," *Film Quarterly* 32, Spring 1979, pp. 38-46.

The Seven Sins of Bette Gordon's *Variety*

by Kay Armatage

1. The First Sin: Bette Gordon

Until *Variety* (1983), as Amy Taubin said, Bette Gordon was a nice girl (*Village Voice*, May 1984, 60). She made the films she thought she was supposed to make. A teacher and ex-spouse of James Benning, she was influenced primarily by the filmmakers of the '60s and '70s, notably Michael Snow, to whose *Walking Woman* she pays homage in *Exchanges* (1978). Beginning in the middle '70s, Gordon made a series of short avant-garde structural films which were described in *Camera Obscura* in the terminology of the current theoretical orthodoxy. Gordon's films, according to Karyn Kay, attempted to make visible the "mysteries of cinematic representation" (*Camera Obscura*, 5, 1980, 81). Among the formal strategies which Gordon employed was the avant-garde convention of the 'meaningless' image: a woman smoking a cigarette or diving into a pool, a woman walking, or two women smoking a cigarette or diving into a pool, a woman walking, or two women exchanging clothes. Rephotographing, time exposures, color treatment, use of negative, black leader, long dissolves, and disjunctive sound/image relations, as well as a rigorously symmetrical editing procedure are some of the other conventional strategies of *Noyes* (1976), *An Algorithm* (1977), and *Exchanges* (1978).

In 1980 came *Empty Suitcases*, a short feature which, as Gordon admits, was influenced by the British new narrativists and modeled so closely on Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys From Berlin/1971* that at moments it slipped into unintended parody (*Village Voice*, 60). Although all of the films thus far had centred on the female image, Gordon says that until *Exchanges*, her films were not consciously feminist. Nevertheless, they were embraced by the feminist film community in the British-influenced movement away from the sociological feminist documentary and towards the enshrinement of the avant-garde as the correct marginal position from which women could deconstruct classical forms of signification. As Kay put it, Gordon's films were concerned with "incompleteness, the variability of women's discourse and her position within language and within representation" (*Camera Obscura*, 5, 85).

At first glance, *Variety* (1983) seems to be a kick in the head to those feminist concerns. Although, as I shall suggest below, Gordon does take into account many of the issues which currently concern feminist film theory, such as the male gaze, the woman's look, female desire, and the woman's relation to

language and the voice, *Variety* takes its stance sharply contrary to a structural avant-garde, paying homage instead to film noir and using a complex combination of classic suturing devices, trance-like poetics, *cinéma vérité* realism, and the pornographic.

2. The Second Sin: Kathy Acker

Kathy Acker is a young New York writer, the daughter of an affluent Jewish family. In the late '70s she left home for the Puerto Rican and drug-addict ghetto of the Lower East Side, earning her living in a live sex show on the second floor of a 42nd St. porn shop. Unlike the leftist-oriented avant-garde, Acker saw no possibility of revolution, particularly in New York, and she opted instead for the acting out of a grand despair in which even liberal ideas seemed impossible. As Acker says, the death of Sid Vicious in 1979 marked the end of that period, and so she took up body-building as a way to physically alter the conditions of identity, became one of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's favorite models, and began to make her living as an art critic (BBC TV interview, 1984). She also wrote novels such as *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* (1978); *The Child-Like Life of the Black Tarantula* (1978); *I Dreamt I was a Nymphomaniac* (1980); *Hello, I'm Erica Jong* (1980); *Diana's Third Almanac* (1982); *Blood and Guts in High School* (1983); *Great Expectations* (1983); and the screenplay for *Variety* (1983).

Acker's writings enjoy a commonality with the avant-garde in their refusal of narrative or story, their impetus to destroy meanings, to transgress rigid definitions of given texts and classic formulations of image and identity, and in their free-wheeling improvisatory juxtapositions reminiscent of Burroughs and Kerouac. Her work seems to have more in common with painters, however, than with other writers. Like painters Julian Schnabel and David Salle, she delights in taking anything from anywhere. Politely referred to as collage, her practise, she chortles, is actually more like plagiarism, as she plunders all kinds of literature, films, conversations, and her own life (BBC TV, 1984). *Great Expectations*, for example, begins from the Dickens novel, inserts quotes from Keats (both poems and letters), slides easily from her own life to *The Story of O* and *The Eye of the Tiger* (a popular schlock novel), *SEMIOTEXT(E)* (which she slams as "that filthy rag"), and others.

Always there is an emphasis on transgressive sexuality. True love she defines as "that violence that's absolutely right." She

explains her work in pornography in political terms, as offering a clear view of sexual relations, since the slave can always see more clearly than the masters. Still the woman is identified as a masochist, wanting to be weak, wanting to be enslaved. *Variety* continues this theme in the figure of the woman who comes to see herself as the object of male fantasy.

3. The Third Sin: Sisterhood and Motherhood

I have attended to these 'bad girl' representations of Gordon and Acker because in their careers and as persons they have acted 'against the grain' of accepted feminist practice. The major tendency amongst women filmmakers (indeed I would say women working in virtually all media) has been towards feminism. Gordon and Acker also work from within the space demarcated as feminist—Gordon certainly in the past, and Acker also in her claims to be seeking a woman's language—but they have firmly resisted the major tendency of the contemporary North American women's movement, the trajectory from sisterhood to motherhood. *Variety* does evince a certain sisterhood or sympathy amongst the peripheral women characters in the bar, who commiserate with each other and reach out in concern for Christine, the central character, but Gordon explicitly rejects the notion of woman's power in terms of collective action, as Christine withdraws from her female friends in her solitary pursuit of her own desire.

As for motherhood, the topic so influentially addressed in Mulvey/Wollen's *Riddle of the Sphinx*, that film's motto could well be the inscription over the portals of the feminist psychoanalytical paradise: "We live in a society ruled by the father, in which the place of the mother is suppressed. Motherhood, and how to live it, or not to live it, lies at the roots of the dilemma." The relation to the mother is central to a wealth of feminist concerns, particularly those which spring from the discourse of psychoanalysis or from a vision of the revolutionary possibilities of a lesbian sisterhood. Barbara Hammer's films draw from both these sources, as does Sally Potter's *Thriller*, and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* offers a militant version of the latter.

Variety, on the other hand, is characterized by a heterosexual tunnel vision, and can be seen as resolutely opposing the movement on the one hand towards a lesbian nation (the 'bad,' mother-rejecting daughters forging towards freedom from patriarchal constraints) or on the other, "looking toward explorations of the way the mother has been constructed, and to attempts to give her the voice she has so long been denied" (E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and the Cinema*, 1984). *Variety* in fact blows a rhubarb to the mother, who is given notice literally on Christine's message tape, nagging about writing a letter to "Arthur" (a brother?). Christine replies, not with the prescriptive embrace of the lost object, the mother's voice, the longed-for reminder of the plenitude of the imaginary, but with excuses, lies, and a derisive imitation.

4. The Fourth: Pornography

In a period in which the most vocal feminist groups are mustering their forces against pornography, anti-censorship feminists take for granted the necessity to eliminate pornography, and *Not A Love Story* is still one of the most important films for a grass-roots feminist audience, *Variety* locates itself on 42nd St. and centres on a woman's growing fascination with pornographic expressions of sexuality. When a man asks Christine the old question, what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like that, she answers not with an analysis of the pornographic destruction of women or of the economic deprivation of women which forces them to take degrading jobs to survive. Instead she answers blankly, "What do you mean? It's a job. I like it there. I enjoy it."

But of course it's not as simple as that.

Christine is a writer who has looked for jobs in publishing, teaching, and other respectable fields, and ends up selling tickets at Variety, the oldest movie theatre in New York, now a porn house. Scenes of Christine at work include constant reminders of the currency of pornography, the woman's body, as the manager calls in the customers with promises of naked women and the kind of sex their wives refuse. Christine becomes fascinated with Louie, a man who frequents the theatre, and she follows him on his rounds through the underworld of peep shows, live sex acts, and mafia protection rackets. This quest becomes the heart of the film, and as she slips ever more deeply into the solitary world of her desire, she becomes increasingly fascinated also with pornographic representations of women.

Early on in the film, there are indications of her deepening obsession. In a scene in a diner with her correct leftist journalist boyfriend, she begins to tell him about her job in a normal, even casual tone. But on the cut to the reverse angle, Christine stares offscreen and begins to recite in an almost trance-like voice, "And then inside on the screen, a woman reaches up and undoes the neckstrap of her halter. Half-turning, she licks her lips and rubs her nipple until it's stiff. Fuck me, she says." Christine turns to look at Mark on these last words, drops back into character, and released from the possessive hold of the pornographic fascination, takes a bit from her hot turkey sandwich.

Later, in a scene with Mark in a car eating Chinese food out of cartons, Christine interrupts Mark's story, again as in a trance: "Other story, story, stories, smooth stories, smooth skin, smooth black slip again her skin. She parades in front of him. Her red snakeskin heels click across the floor. He licks his lips. She kneels down in front of him. She slowly lifts up her slip, showing herself to him. She kneels down on all fours, turning herself to him. She waits for him." When Mark finally interrupts, asking, "Why are you telling me this?", she replies, "I'm telling you about my life." Not only Christine's discourse, but her very notion of her own subjectivity, has been invaded by pornographic fascination.

There are three more scenes involving the pornographic. One is a variation on the one just described, where Mark continues doggedly playing pinball as Christine recites another story of a woman having sex first with a snake, then with a tiger, and finally with a man. The story lasts for four minutes—a strikingly long period for a monologue—during which the film cuts back and forth between Mark's profile and Christine's full-face looking off, with no attempt at POV sutur-

ing. This scene is almost immediately followed by a 12-minute scene without dialogue—a length even more striking for the suppression of discourse—in which Christine tails Louie to the Flamingo Hotel in Asbury Park, where she steals a porn magazine from his overnight case. Here the trajectory of the hermeneutic quest is entwined with the pornographic such that the pornographic representation of women becomes the virtual object of the female subject's pursuit, a complex and surprising reversal of expectations.

The following scenes are the 'rape fantasy' and the 'object of desire' scene. This passage of the film is extremely dense, pushing inexorably through an escalating spiral of transgressive representations, each more shocking than the last, as Christine becomes more and more caught up in the workings of her desire. The rape fantasy begins in the hotel room, as Christine arranges herself in a *Playboy* position on the bed and gazes at pictures in the stolen magazine. Already the pornographic representations are having a transformative effect. Cut to Christine in the Variety ticket booth, from which she exits to the projection booth, where we see the porn movie on the screen replaced by her fantasy of Louie entering the room of the previous scene. He approaches her on the bed and begins to undress. She watches him. In this rape/seduction scene, porn clichés abound, ending with flames flickering over the screen. Cut to Christine posing in front of her mirror at home, now fully transformed into the object of desire of conventional pornography: she is dressed in a sexy corset, garters and stockings, and a 'little-girl' hairdo. She poses, caresses herself, licks her lips, opens her mouth, and so on, in clear imitation of the representations of women that she has come to know from Louie's world.

These scenes, along with the investigative scenes—Christine's pursuit of Louie—form the major movement of the film. They are activated by two principal motifs. In the

scenes in which Mark appears, it is clear that the straight heterosexual relationship cannot contain these transgressive expressions of Christine's transforming sexuality. The correct boyfriend is inadequate to her desires. He increasingly absents himself from her, first withdrawing his gaze, then his person; he finally disappears from the film altogether. The other motif, counterpointing and underscoring the inadequacy of bourgeois heterosexuality in the face of articulated female desire, is that these transformations of Christine's desires have been

occurring systematically in relation to Christine's pursuit of Louie, the object of her fascination. It is her quest for knowledge, for the 'masculine' goal of mastery, which paradoxically transforms her into the conventional representation of the object of masculine domination.



Sandy McLeod as Christine in *Variety*.

5. The Male Gaze and Female Desire

The shadowing/investigative scenes are among the most pleasurable in the film, from many points of view. They are the scenes in which John Lurie's music is at its best, for one thing. Visually also they are thick with the trappings of film noir: chiaroscuro highlighting of emblematic scenes of gangsters meeting under streetlights, headlights piercing the

blackness or flickering dimly across the water, camera smoothly tracking as cars are followed, or hand-held camera stopping at the lattice-work iron barrier of the empty, echoing subway station. These scenes are also replete with visual jokes which play on film noir conventions: Christine silently mouthing "follow that car"; the small-time hood shrugging his shoulders and buttoning his suit jacket in a gesture learned from the movies. These sorts of visual pleasures give the film a sensual surface which agreeably marks it in contrast to the flatly lit,

symmetrically composed, static image of the modernist avant-garde.

However, in its deployment of cinematic strategies, the film consistently operates in opposition to classical conventions of visual pleasure. These tracking scenes rigorously represent Christine's point of view, transgressing the hegemony of the dominating male gaze which characterizes film noir as well as the classic realist cinema. *Variety* systematically excludes the male gaze throughout the film. Although clearly the film is about men looking at women, specifically looking at pornographic representations of women, the image presents no instance of the male gaze except in tightly restricted circumstances. Mark is initially allowed to look at Christine, but his gaze is circumscribed always by the over-the-shoulder shot, allowing the spectator no invisible access, no direct identification, with his point of view. And when Louie looks at Christine, she is perceived through a mirror, in which her image is at the same time reflected.

The 'lipstick' shot is a good example: CU Christine applying lipstick, her image reflected in a mirror; a man's torso enters the frame behind her; she looks at him through the mirror, as he pulls close enough into frame to be reflected *from the nose down* in the shot. His eyes, his look, are framed out, and the foreground of the image emphasizes Christine's look, returning his. Throughout the film, the mirror is used as a frequent device to circumscribe the traditional spectator position, consistently deflecting and confounding the spectator's gaze at the woman, or mediating between the male gaze, the camera's gaze, and that of the spectator.

Thus it is Christine's gaze which provides spectator access to the text, effecting a displacement of the cinematic convention of the dominating male gaze, the transgression called for by feminist theory. As Janice Doane and Devon Leigh Hodges write, summarizing a decade of feminist speculation: "For finally, an active feminist gaze is itself a challenge to the tradition that constitutes women as the passive recipients of the language and lots of men" (*Enclitic* V, 2, 1982, 56).

Not only does Christine's look control the image, but it is her curiosity, her fascination, her desire, which motivates the film both structurally and thematically, specifically in the scenes in which she pursues the man. In a narrative which is motivated by the woman's curiosity and structured around the activation of the woman's look, one might expect to find representations of the woman's body which could counter precisely, as Karyn Kay puts it, the "entrapment of the female image in an eroticized circulation of identification and representation" (*Camera Obscura*, 5, 1980, 81). But it is precisely the investigative scenes which trigger the pornographic scenes which always immediately follow.

Thus the major conundrum which the film poses: it is Christine's own desire, her quest for knowledge, for the 'masculine' goal of mastery, for knowledge won through sexuality and power won through that knowledge, which gradually brings about the transformation of Christine into exactly the object of desire, a pornographic fantasy constructed for the male gaze.

6. Film Noir

At least since 1978, with the publication of the BFI monograph, *Women and Film Noir*, feminist film theorists have attended to the progressive possibilities of the

'gynocentric' genres, film noir and melodrama, as offering instances in which the operations of the patriarchy are problematized—in the sense that the genres pose problems for themselves which they can scarcely contain (Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," *Screen* vol. 25, no. 1, 1984, 20). Christine Gledhill, Annette Kuhn, Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey have all written influentially about melodrama and film noir as types of films in which the contradictions of patriarchal representations of women are most acute (Mary Ann Doane, "Gilda: Epistemology as Striptease," *Camera Obscura* 11, 1983, 11).

Christine Gledhill has noted five structural features of film noir which produce the genre's ambiguous ideological effects. These are 1) the investigative structure of the narrative, in which the hermeneutic code is deflected from questions of the crime to the woman as enigma 2) plot devices of voice-over and flashback which, linked with the investigative structure, destabilize the male discourse from its control over events and truth 3) the proliferation of points of view, allowing for a struggle for control of the image and encouraging "the creation of heroines whose means of struggle is precisely the manipulation of the image which centuries of female representations have provided" 4) frequent unstable characterization of the heroine, posing the discontinuous and contradictory stereotypes of women as a problem for the spectator 5) an expressionist visual style and emphasis on sexuality in the photographing of the heroine.

Mary Ann Doane usefully expands on this last point: in its reliance on high-contrast lighting and use of shadows, film noir establishes a disturbance of vision as the premise of its signifying system. The image often conceals more than it reveals, but the message is clear: unrestrained female sexuality is a danger, not only to men but to the system of signification. Doane quotes Montrelay's phrase suggesting that woman is "the ruin of signification" (Doane, *Camera Obscura*, 11, 1983, 11).

Thus film noir links the issue of knowledge and possibility/impossibility with issues of femininity and visibility. Woman confounds the relation between the visible and knowable at the same time that she is made the object of the gaze. Janey Place has also noted the progressive possibilities of the femme fatale character of film noir: "The dark woman of film noir had something her innocent sister lacked: access to her own sexuality (and thus to men's) and the power that this access unlocked" (Janey Place, *Women and Film Noir*, 1978, 36). The femme fatale ultimately loses her power, but "It is not their inevitable demise we remember but rather their strong, dangerous, and above all, exciting sexuality . . . We retain the image of the erotic, strong, unrepressed (if destructive) woman . . . a remarkably potent image of woman" (Place, 45).

In this context, *Variety* appears to be a text-book investigation of the possibilities of turning the genre on its head. 1) The investigator is now a woman and the enigmatic figure is male 2) the investigation is conducted in the present, thus eliminating the subjective voice-over ruminations on the past, guilt, etc. 3) the point of view is clearly located in the woman's gaze 4) rather than the dark woman of film noir, the heroine is clearly a good girl with a good boyfriend whose character disintegration is systematically revealed as a function of the events and circumstances of her situation 5) the conventional film noir visual style is relegated to the "outside" world of the investigation, and the woman's own space is marked in contrast by an inflected, clearly lit and mundane openness, and until the end of the film, the woman resists, in her apparel and demeanor as well as mise-en-scene, any extreme of sexualization.

The possibilities of such reversals, it would seem, are complex and dynamic, including not only the construction of alternative representations of women, at the origination of female curiosity and desire, but an investigation of cinematic signification as well.

7. The Seventh Sin: The Woman's Voice

In *Variety*, however, as I have suggested, no alternative representation of woman has been posited (but rather the inevitability of the conventional), and no alternative female discourse has been found. In fact, and this is my final point, the woman's voice has been excised entirely from the film. The conventional confessional or investigative voice—over so frequently found in film noir which is almost without exception male (the exception being *Mildred Pierce*) has been displaced, in the shadowing scenes, by the woman's unbroken silence—always underlined by sound effects (echoing footsteps, etc.) and by John Lurie's sensational music. Christine's own space is invaded by the voices of others (including a verbal molester telling a dirty joke) via the phone message machine, and indeed her voice, in the pornographic recitation scenes, is performed as if possessed, taken over by the discourse of an imaginary other. In the penultimate scene with the phone call to Louie, her voice finally asserts itself in an articulation of her knowledge, but the results of her commanding discourse are never shown.

We might come to agree that such reversals are ultimately futile, as Herman Rapaport argues in his elaborate meditation on *Alice in Wonderland* as an instance of the activation of female curiosity:

... in pronouncing "you are nothing but a pack of cards", Alice does not necessarily dispel the "laws" of signification or the syntax of the pack. Simple shuffling, the throwing of cards into the air, does not make the language of cards go away; it just initiates a new game. . . . All Alice can do, like any other dreamer, is disrupt or silence the formidable chain of dream signification, of Wonder-land, to disarticulate by recognizing that a representation must be put in its place, diminished in status vis-a-vis the ego. But to do so is already to practice Freudian negation, to recognize the power of the decapitating queen by taking decapitation into one's own hands, by throwing or scattering the deck or figures. . . . To scatter the deck is not to abolish anything—a pack, a game. . . .—but merely to insure whatever is already and always there.

(Herman Rapaport, "The Disarticulated Image: Gazing in Wonderland," *Enclitic* vol. vi no. 2, 1982, 59)

8. But Wait: Redemption

I seem to have written myself into a hole here. Can the sins of *Variety* be redeemed? Let us go back again to those last four scenes for another reading.

From the depths of her capitulation to male fantasy (the

corset scene), Christine moves through another investigation scene, which culminates in the predictable consequences: a man mashes her in a porn shop, from which she flees. The scene clearly acts as reminder of the woman's vulnerability in the pornographic world, and perhaps should warn her to abandon her quest. Third last scene: at home in her apartment, now strewn with garbage, mess, pornographic movie posters (she sits on one titled *Beyond Shame*), and in tears, Christine sits listening to Little Anthony and the Imperials sing "The Diary": "How I'd like to look, into that little book, the one that has that lock and key, and know the boy you care for, the one that's in your diary."

The song is explicit in its connection of sexual desire with a mastering knowledge; a gooey old song, it represents the moment of Christine's understanding - at last - the nature of her own desire. From those depths, Christine acts: she reaches for the phone. In the penultimate scene, Christine asserts her power, claiming her knowledge and commanding Louie to meet her.

The last shot/scene of the film offers no answers, to be sure. It offers instead the archetypal film noir image, stripped to its essentials: the blackness of night encroaching from the edges of the screen, the lamplight glistening on a rainy cobblestone street, and no one is there. The emblematic signifying elements of film noir are there, but they are presented literally as an empty space.

Between desire and gratification lies an empty space, romantic or sinister, a sign emptied of predetermined meaning, a space opened up. In that empty sign rests the achievement of *Variety*'s transgressions. The sign, emptied of meaning, is redolent with possibilities.

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Textual Excess

in Joyce Wieland's

Handtinting

by Kass Banning

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new cultural direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.

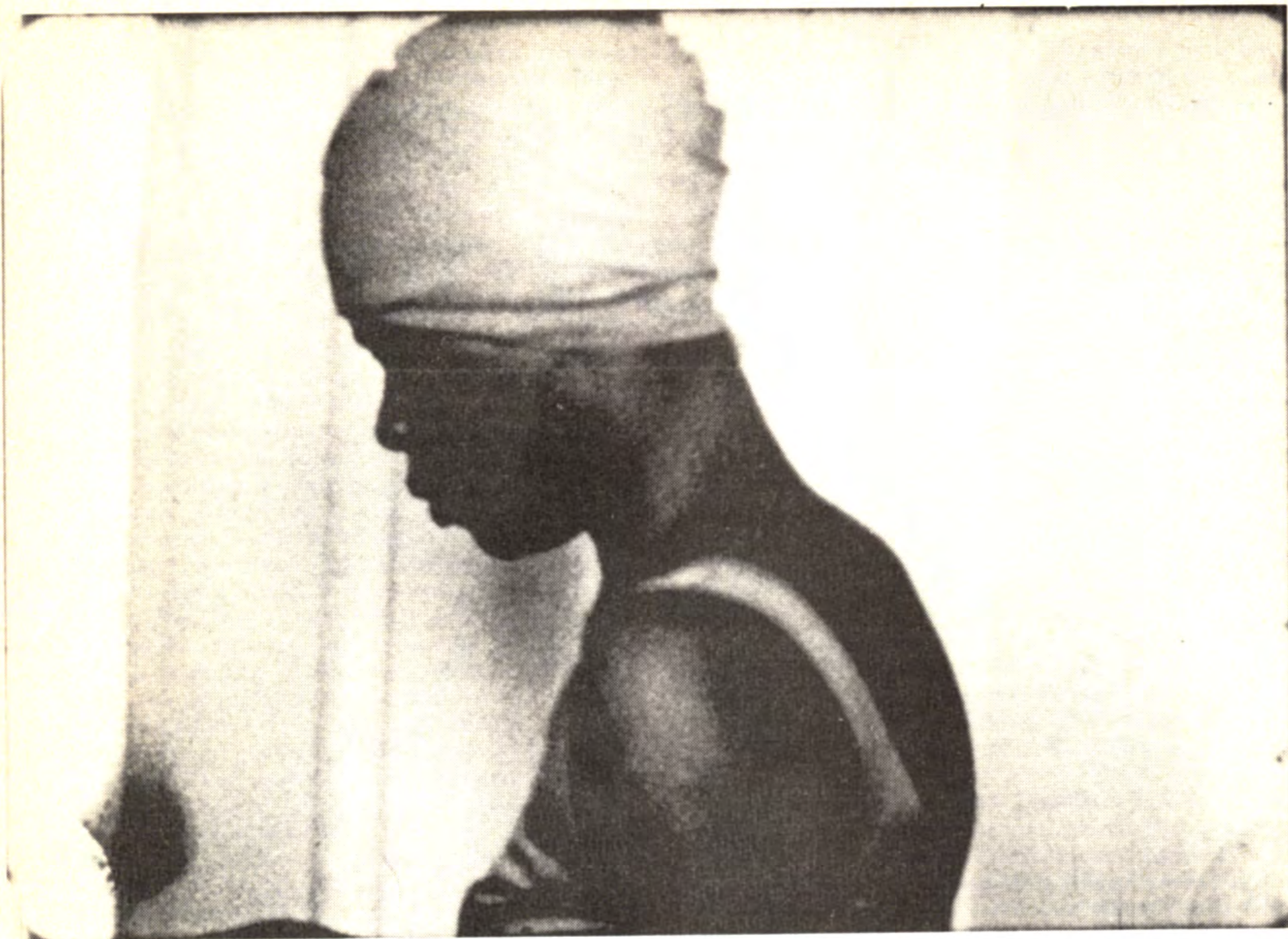
Adrienne Rich

The films of Joyce Wieland have been consistently placed within two frameworks, both of which are unsatisfactory. While the Canadian popular press reception has endeavoured to familiarize and contain "Our Joyce" as one of Canada's truly eclectic artists, film anthologies and criticism have habitually appropriated Wieland's work into the structuralist or modernist canon. What I would like to suggest is that while issues of form are clearly not exempt from Wieland's consideration, her films exceed any normative definitions or any attempt to categorize them according to particular avant-garde schools. What is at issue in her films is not the deconstruction or negation of representation but the posing of new representational values and relations. And to the extent that her work embodies an interrogation of formal conventions, this interrogation is always intersected by an abiding and persistent concern with the political.

In 1969, P. Adams Sitney applied the term "structural film" to works by Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland (whom Sitney is comfortable referring to as "Snow's wife"). In this article, he outlines the four characteristics of structural film: fixed frame/camera position; loop-printing; rephotography off the screen; and the flicker effect. More recently, the term has most usually been applied to those films which 1) investigate the physical properties of film as a flat material, utilizing light, projection, printing procedures, illusion of movement etc. and 2) which emphasize the tensions amongst the physical materials, perceptual processes, and the pictorial realities film has traditionally represented. Historically, critics have treated Wieland's work within the context of the development of structural film.

In the 1979 edition of his book *Visionary Film*, Sitney's revised consideration of structural film omits the original discussion of Wieland's films. We could mark this as a profound absence, an acknowledgement of difference, an inscription of Wieland's excess, signalling her uncontainability. If structural film is a foundation garment fashioned by men, "Joyce" (as Sitney would have it) is the film artist who exceeds its strictures.

My own experience of Wieland's work, and especially



Handtinting (1967), involved a similar encounter with this "something extra", and my reasons for engaging with her work through this film are decidedly personal and admittedly impressionistic. I first viewed *Handtinting* ten years ago and it has remained bothersome since. I have found no success in trying to situate it, in spite of the temptations of available models for doing so. The crux of the problem was the constant sense of that "something additional", the surplus, the excess alluded to (and avoided by) others, that extra which renders the film, as the French would say, *de trop*. My effort in what follows will be to give some (provisional) specificity (if that's not too oxymoronic a notion) to Wieland's excess/surplus in *Handtinting*, with a view to extending the discussion of her work beyond the conventional boundaries.

On the face of it, *Handtinting* is made up of a number of fairly simple elements: it opens with a brief pan across a brick wall; quick cuts of young black women dancing follow, along with shots of women observing the dance; a women's locker room at a swimming pool; head-dunking in the pool; socializing, laughing, conversation. One image, that of a woman with chin in hand, reappears frequently throughout the film—in a way, the formal lynchpin of the piece. Most of the shots are repeated several times, often laterally flipped, and much of the filmstock has been sporadically tinted with various coloured dyes. Occasional sections of leader, scratched footage and filmstock perforations also appear.

These elements go on to comprise several important features that I'd like to examine here, beginning with the rhythmic qualities of the film. The most obvious rhythmic component would be the gestures and bodily movements of the women depicted—the constant repetition of these images

establishes a series of pattern-like sequences, but it should be noted that their potential homogeneity is seriously mitigated by the fragmentary framing and cutting. Gestures are often left incomplete, with cuts occurring at illogical points within movements. These gestural images (dance movement, Hallelujah arm-flailing, turning over bathing-cap etc.) are often played off against complimentary movements in opposing directions, or by the lateral inversion of a previous shot, producing a rhythmic alternation of direction within the frame. Moments of stasis (white women observers at the dance) serve as punctuation within the rhythmic score.

Not only are the rhythmic qualities of the film produced by means of depictions of women's bodies—but there is a "bodily" quality to the rhythm itself. I suppose this is something of a truism. However, the types of bodily resonances that comprise the experience of the film are especially powerful, at least for me. There is an almost audible sensation at play here, as stirring and basic as Motown R&B, and yet this is a silent film. Rhythm is the film's music, its speech beyond the silence, the rhythmic cadence of the woman's body and the body of the text.

This bodily quality to the rhythm of *Handtinting* poses a challenge to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory which denies any pleasure or desire outside of language. Rather, *Handtinting* is aligned more with the kind of considerations apparent in Kristeva's theory of the semiotic. According to Kristeva, the semiotic represents a prelinguistic, atavistic core of energy grounded in the acoustic, perceptual, and tactile experience which precedes representation, individuation and language. The syntax in *Handtinting*, with its pulsations and rhythms recalls this atavistic movement.

In addition, the film invokes a different form of pleasure by representing a specific loss—the loss of the imaginary closeness to the mother's body. Separation is replayed by the loss/disappearance, and reappearance of the images of women in the film as they vanish around corners or move out of frame. This play on the absence and presence of the women's bodies replays and re-evokes the primordial experience of loss and separation from the maternal body. The film's insistent articulation of images of corporeality, the movement of the women's bodies as they dance, gesture, swim, stands in contrast to the silence of the film, which refers, again, to this prelinguistic space. And it is this movement back through representation, through the linguistic structures which order our experience according to the measure of a rationalist (and patriarchal) economy, that foregrounds the possibility of a representation of that which remains invisible and absent—female pleasure and specificity.

While there is this double movement of the foregrounding of the material substrate and the play with polyvalent textuality, the image in Wieland's work always maintains its own particular resonance. The images of the women's bodies in *Handtinting*, for example, mostly black and poor, raise the question of how to represent those that have been marginalized and excluded by dominant representations. While the "materialist" techniques of the film work against and undermine the transparency of the image and the possibility of situating the latter in an immediate relation to a pro-filmic 'real', the image maintains both a discursive and a referential value.

To come back to the text, I want to emphasize one more essentially rhythmic element which will lead me to consideration of a second central feature of the film, namely its construction of an imaginary, unrepresented, unspeakable (psychic?) space. Considered in terms of its material substrate, the film can be regarded as a series of flickering shapes and colors composed of varying densities of emulsion on celluloid. The use of complimentary shots, and lateral flips produces an oscillation of areas of dense emulsion from side to side within the frame. Not only does this technique engage the eye movement of the viewer, it also sets up a kind of spatial symmetry in a material sense. The alternation of dense emulsion from side to side within the frame is suggestive of a sort of symmetrical enclosure, a constructed site similar to that produced by the articulation of lines of sight in the film. *Handtinting* rigorously structures the gazes of the women depicted so as to construct a space outside the depiction itself. Initially these spaces are specific to individual sequences: shots of women dancing, preparing to swim, etc. are presented/constituted as separate locales, but eventually, through the interruption of the continuity of specific sequences, this constructed space takes on a more general character. It is an elsewhere, an outside of the film, yet its existence/its concept is established on the inside. It is the space, the site/sight of excess, of contradiction, a no-place, u-topia, too much. The construction of this unspeakable locus/matrix by means of symmetrical enclosure and lateral contiguity of material substrate (emulsion), is similar to the suture effect—it is built upon the sight lines of the women.

Perhaps it is necessary at this point to insist that this observation/interpretation is distinct from those attempts by (mainly American) feminist art historians to counter ubiquitous phallic imagery with efforts to develop complementary female imagery. My attempt here is however to trace a textual activity, a movement, rather than to search for feminine motifs in the form of radical content; this is the attempt to explain the text and its activities as a practice of difference, of difference inscribed. It is not the translation of some pre-linguistic

essence of woman, but a textual system where difference is conceived as an act of subversion operating through, and against, conventional syntax, grammar.

I've suggested the construction, in *Handtinting*, of an indeterminate space enclosed within a symmetrical border. Another element I'd like to consider, which is also "outside" the "body" of the film, consists of various marks of the apparatus, the plastic material of the film—I mean the use appearance of perforations, scratches, dyes applied to the celluloid. The perforations made with knitting needles (domestic deconstruction perhaps) and usually found on colored leader, while contributing to the overall rhythmic "dance" of the film, also act as slits or tears in the fabric of the text, interrupting it, breaking down the possibility of homogenous reading/meaning. The handtinting works in a similar manner. The (apparently) random dispersal of dyes of different colors, without regard for the integrity of specific shots, places the identity of their repetition in question: what we get is repetition with a difference, something extra, a surplus.

The system of formal articulations of the gaze within the film that I sketched earlier, is broken down at one particular juncture: near the middle there appears a brief shot from an earlier Wieland film, *Catfood* (1967). This shot functions in a way similar to the perforations, scratches and tints in that it interrupts the continuity of the film's representational plane. However, it also operates as a kind of signature—what Derrida has called the "signature effect"—marking both the unique specificity of the artist, and enabling our consideration of all of the extratextual "outsides"/imaginary spaces/unspeakable sites constructed by the film as precisely a utopian terrain, a locus of potentially heterogenous avant-garde practice, a surplus, multiple—again, too much.

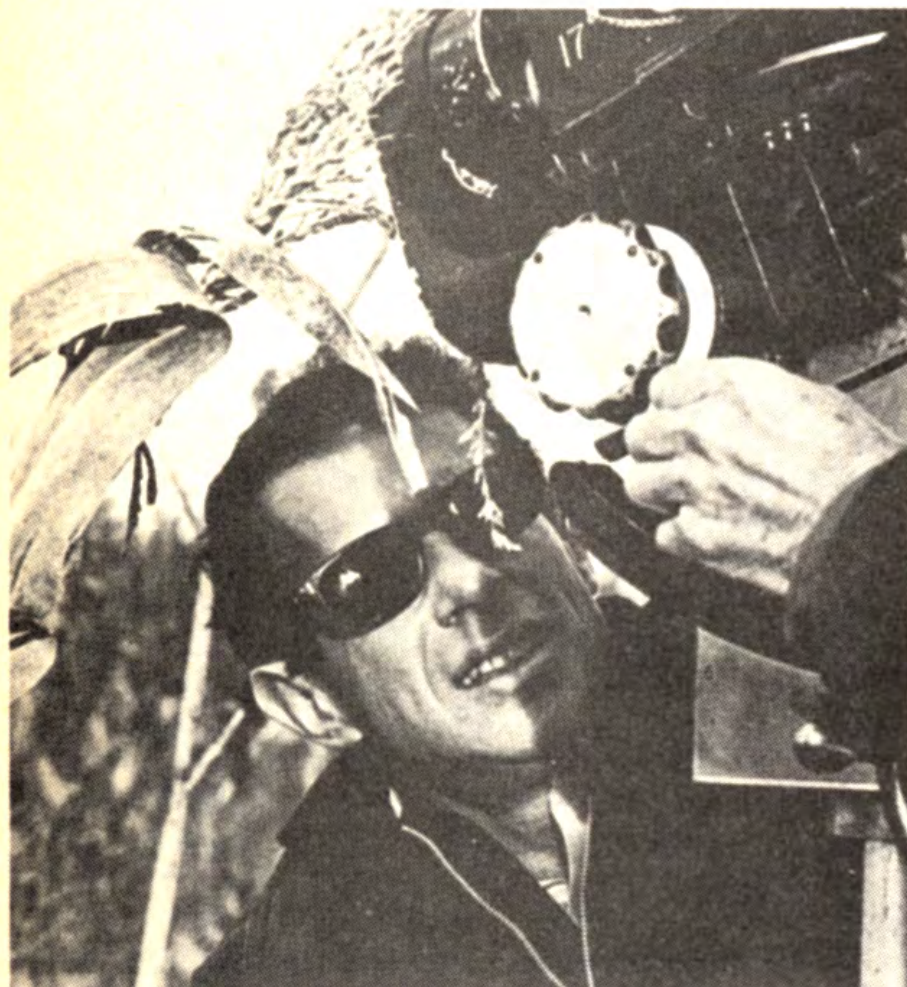
Barthes and Foucault, among others, have signalled the decline in status of authorship, of textual authority. The author whose "death" they acclaim is, of course, the one long revered in Western culture (and certainly still fetishised in many quarters—not the least of which is avant-garde cinema), the author as master, as phallic will-to-power over the text. What I want to suggest here is the possibility of another author emerging, one conditioned by a principle which is decidedly not phallic, one which resonates both inside and outside a text as a surplus, a signature, an excess. This is the author of a writing (whether literary, filmic or other) marked by the sense of a heterogenous elsewhere, a feminine (though not necessarily female) site of utopian possibility.

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An interview with Arthur Penn



Directing *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

by Richard Lippe & Robin Wood

I first met and interviewed Arthur Penn in 1970, during the making of *Little Big Man*; the interview was published in *Movie 18*. At that time Penn's career seemed to have developed an irresistible impetus that would secure him a prominent place in the American cinema of the next decades: *The Chase*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Alice's Restaurant* (the films which, with *Night Moves*, represent the summit of his achievement to date) had followed each other in rapid succession, establishing their director commercially as well as artistically. In the fifteen years that have ensued, however, Penn has been able to make only four films, of which only *Night Moves* can be judged a complete artistic success (it was a commercial disaster).

This February, Penn was in Toronto as executive producer of *Dead of Winter*, a Gothic thriller scripted by two school-friends of his son's (he has since taken over the direction). Richard Lippe and I seized the opportunity to invite him to our apartment for dinner and an interview that proved to be more like a conversation (we have tried to preserve its informal and relaxed tone). We wanted to discuss his work since *Little Big Man* and, especially, the problems faced by film-makers of ambition, intelligence and integrity within the contemporary Hollywood situation.

RW: I thought we might talk first about the conditions of working in Hollywood . . . There seem to be so many problems in getting interesting projects set up. . . and a kind of narrowing of the traditional genres to a few very stereotypical plots and film types.

AP: Absolutely—well you know it's really an antiquated medium in the States because the studios which had existed under another environment—economic, cultural etc.—had been signatories to contracts with the unions which are now proving to be onerous. The cost of labor is so outrageously high that ordinary average films are slipping upward into the twenty million dollar bracket very easily and given that, and given the demise and retirement of the sort of patriarchal figures who used to run the studios, they've now become sort of relatively minor possessions of these conglomerates and multi-national companies. You know, as Coca-Cola, Gulf and Western, Rupert Murdoch at Universal. Every studio you can really talk about is really one of these sort of relatively minor income-producing units of a great big multi-national conglomerate. And what they then do as a result of that is instead of being studios with an ego all their own, they become this kind of corporate entity, and

then the natural progression is that the executives who are put into those companies are essentially company men. They're business school graduates, they're cost-effective and you begin to have that kind of thinking. Whatever one may think about the old moguls, there was a certain passion, a love for movies. And whether it be Goldwyn or Warner or Harry Cohn or Louis B. Mayer there was something, however dreadful they may have been individually, there was at the heart of it that movies were their life. And that's not true of these people; these people could just as well be selling cereal or automobiles or whatever. And immediately you come there with an idea, their first impulse is to categorize the idea—what is it most like? what did that do? what's its market expectations? And with that kind of thinking, you're automatically filtering and censoring the aberrant, odd film, the one that we all love, you know the one that is not like every other film or every other automobile we drive that one sees on the street. And that's the nature of it now, so there is this kind of a priori censorship. It's not the right word but it's not the wrong word either. You know there's something inherent in the American phenomenon. Capitalism has reached the point where there is this a priori censor-

ship which is in effect—it's in effect in this peculiar way, which is, if you want to be paid well to make your movie, you are automatically a participant in this structure. As a participant in the structure you're as culpable as they are. I don't mean to say, to be exonerating myself as the sort of pure artist—it's quite the reverse. I've been every bit as culpable as they. Personally speaking, I think I'm at the old crossroads where I need now to change my life and to move away; the idea of making film outside of the U.S. or in the primitive circumstances in which I originally began is terribly attractive.

RW: *We read in Variety that there's the possibility of your doing a film in France on French money?*

AP: Yes, I'm working on that idea at the moment. I was approached while I was in France by several French producers who suggested that I might want to make a film in Europe. But, and this is the unfortunate part, they all suggested that the films needed to have American stars. There are no stars, other than American stars, who are world stars, and since it's now a world market, however one would think about it, that immediately begins to be both attractive and something of an impediment, because very many of the agents for these film stars just won't talk to you in any other terms except "so-and-so gets five million." That's it, and that's an immutable fact. As soon as you have one of those immutable facts in the beginning, where everybody says to the hierarchy, "well, if he's getting his full money I want my full money, etc." and we're in that terrible game.

RL: *Would it be easier for you to set up an independent production on the strength of your name and what you've accomplished?*

AP: No, there's nothing inherent in that that's particularly advantageous, in fact it's a little bit disadvantageous. It's a lot easier if you're sort of an unknown, for instance, and set up and do a little scratch, non-union film. As the unions know about you and know your reputation, they tend to come in and say, wait a minute, what about some teamsters, what about I.A. camerapeople, what about so-and-so, and before you know it you've got a big work force. It's a real dilemma. It's not confined only to the movies, it's confined to the basic American capitalist structure at this point, in which labour has this peculiar position which is that they don't participate in the ownership of it; therefore they get these enormously high wages instead of having some kind of rooting interest. In the absence of that kind of participatory rooting interest it seems to me to be somewhat close to the heart of the matter.

RW: *This also seems to be underpinned, the whole situation seems to be underpinned by the current ideological climate in an age where there's a massive swing to the right and the projects that do make money are generally ultra-right wing projects, reactionary and even crypto-fascist films. The whole Rocky-Rambo syndrome becomes more scary as times goes on.*

AP: Yes it does, and it's extremely symptomatic of both the culture and of the movie "industry" which now begins to be the appropriate word for it—it is now an industry in the same way that munitions are an industry. You know all my life I've resented that word as being applied to the movies. But now I think it's perfect. I think it is industrial—it's product-designed, mass-audience designed, and what ideology creeps into it unfortunately is of the extreme right or, I'm not sure whether you characterize it necessarily as right, it's a kind of desperation today. The *Rambo* image is such a desperate image of lonely obsessive power and trying to rectify wrongs that have been done in the past by some

other forces; and certainly the—I was going to say implicit but it's really explicit—choice of the kind of constant Soviet enemy as the figure is so dangerous, so dangerous to the thinking—it just terrifies me.

RW: *The desperation of all that seems to go with the whole sense, I think, that capitalism may be entering into some kind of ultimate crisis as prophesied by Marx over a hundred years ago, a series of escalating economic crises which we've certainly been through and now this kind of desperate need to be reassured in what amounts to a kind of hysterical way or a fantasy way, the alternative to the Rambo-Rocky films is sheer fantasy, explicit fantasy, which carries the same kind of reassurance but in a way that we don't actually have to admit that we believe it.*

AP: But the *Rambo* and the *Rockies* are so close to home...and there's something indisputable about the numbers that those films are able to assemble at the box office. Those paid admissions are shocking, are shocking, because they're paid for that and they're not paid for a quite wide spectrum of other kinds of films. And it's also fascinating that the very same actor, Stallone, put him in *Rhinestone* and nobody shows up. In anything but these roles nobody goes.

RL: *Do you think that to a certain extent that kind of audience response is planted by publicity and media hype?*

AP: Well you see it seems to me that that's calling into play the very best of these kind of industrialists who are running the studios now. Give them something like that to do and they do it brilliantly based on selling it before it's even hit the marketplace, before one foot of it has been turned in the camera. They know how to do that, much as they know how to sell automobiles a year ahead or whatever, you know, they sell all products superbly, when the audience knows what the ingredients are going to be. What they can't sell is the unknown, the mysterious, the unexpected, the aberrant, the anomalous, that doesn't sit well.

RW: *Do you think After Hours could have any importance, I don't mean so much as a film itself, but for what it was trying to do? Scorsese seems to have set out very deliberately to prove that it is still possible to make a low-budget film on a little subject without any really big stars, and the film does appear to have done rather well commercially within a certain range. It's been running for months up here. Only in one theatre of course.*

AP: Yes, exactly, and that's almost a holy action. But when a picture stays in one theatre it doesn't really generate income. It does all right, it keeps the theatre occupied. I have nothing but admiration for Scorsese for doing it. And indeed he proved all those points, but unfortunately what the film's also proving to the financiers is that that's not a very productive use of their money. They would say, I could take my money and put it into stocks or bonds or whatever and have a better income than that film is generating. I've even heard this kind of gossip about the movie studios—that the executives of the conglomerates say about movies, we could take that 250 million dollars a year that are allocated to...production, invest it elsewhere and make a better return than we're making on films. Unfortunately that's proving to be true. The number of films that are going to be made by the studios are diminishing at an alarming rate. I think Coca-Cola says Columbia is not to make more than twelve films in the next year; Fox is not going to make more than about five. MGM at the present moment is caught up in this terrible period of acquisition by Ted Turner. So far the only film that has a go ahead is this little film, *Dead of Winter*. It's a very inexpensive film, done under these peculiar circumstances.

RW: By a completely unknown director.

AP: Exactly. And what's marvelous about Mary Steenburgen is that she was perceptive enough to see in this something wonderful to do, and Roddy Macdowell did that too, while a number of others just turned it down. Agents, they said—I wouldn't even send it to them. No way. It's a tough time.

RW: You've either told me in the past or I've read about a number of projects that you were working on or trying to get set up, a project about strip-mining you mentioned at one point, a film called *The Last Cowboy* was actually mentioned in *Variety*, and didn't you also mention a comedy?

AP: Quite possibly I did mention a number of comedies.

RW: I wondered what had happened to all those, why they didn't get off the ground?

AP: *The Last Cowboy* didn't get off the ground because it was about the last cowboy. It was about agri-business taking over the ranges and the last individualistic spirit. *Cowboy* was based on pieces of material that appeared in the *New Yorker*, factual pieces. Our screenplay followed the same configurations. What's naive about it is that within the very companies themselves are these warring factions. One section of the company will buy the rights to *The Last Cowboy* with that very title, and then comes the screenplay and they say, "But it has a terrible downer ending. It has to have a happy ending." And then they say, "Well why don't you make a movie called *The First Cowboy*?" You know, but if you're going to buy *The Last Cowboy* you're caught in this...

RL: Did this project get very far along before it was...

AP: *The Last Cowboy*? A couple of drafts of the script. I was with Warner Brothers and I was working with a writer who was handsomely paid by Warner Brothers to write a script. So then came those terrible meetings. They said "we like the script but we just don't like the ending" and that was a real question of conscience on our part. How can we possibly do this story without having this ending.

RW: You could have tried to do a Douglas Sirk happy ending.

AP: I suppose I could but I'm not much good at them.

RL: You can't really tack on an ironic happy ending—the whole film has to carry through that irony on various levels.

AP: Exactly. It had some wonderful scenes, *marvellous*. So I don't know, I don't know. With a film like that...I'm trying...to lure a few of my friends to go out and make a film elsewhere.

RL: Could you get together a group of people and have the film financed and produced independently, giving you the control you wanted?

AP: It's extremely difficult...for instance I'm talking about a film now that would involve four of us. It wouldn't take a great deal of money either, but nonetheless the picture would still cost in the vicinity of six or seven million dollars. It just does. And once you're into that cost, without our taking our fees, it gets to be very difficult even though the studios, I think, would be very responsive. It means that all of the artists have to make the essential sacrifice, which I'm certainly prepared to do. I don't know how many of my fellows would be prepared. It's a little easier for directors to be this cavalier about that because we have longer careers, but actors feel that terrible clock ticking away. They're up there in that high money-earning period for a relatively short time and their agents certainly know that. Very, very few of them have endured much beyond ten years.

RW: You managed to make *Four Friends* without any stars whatever. Craig Wasson was barely known at that time. The only other familiar face to me was Lois Smith. Was that easy

to set up? Did it have anything to do with Steve Tesich's success with *Breaking Away*?

AP: It had. It had a little to do with that and a little to do with my reputation and it had to do with the last of a company, in this case Filmways, which was sort of breathing its last. It didn't have a lot of money so it gambled on two films, *Four Friends* and *Blowout*. Neither was the kind of film I would gamble on to save a company. But on the other hand they didn't have the bigger sums to go for the bigger stars so they thought they could get the best of the recognizable names this way. So they did. I regretted deeply that the film didn't make money for that company. I appreciated their last gesture.

RW: Nor did *Blowout*.

AP: And that had Travolta.

RL: And it was much more expensive.

AP: And certainly Travolta at that point was a huge name.

RW: We watched *Four Friends* again the other evening. I still find it a very strange film. I'm somewhat unsure what you were trying to do in that film.

AP: I'm pretty much unsure myself.

RW: It seems interesting to me, but a failure overall. It doesn't seem very clearly focussed. I don't know what you feel about it.

AP: I don't feel that.

RW: There seems a problem with the central character, possibly I think, Craig Wasson, who is always somewhat bland, uncharismatic. Also, just what we're to make of Danilo and what attitude the film wants us to take toward him. He seems such a schmuck most of the time.

AP: (laughter)

RW: The film seems to be inviting us to have much more sympathy with him than I certainly ever have.

AP: The informing idea of the film was that it was an era in which it was very difficult to have a conventional hero or to have somebody who could genuinely enlist your sympathy. We were all quite strange during the sixties, people were acting, I don't know, odd in a rather marvelous way. I still think quite romantically about the sixties but in this case, I think we were talking about someone coming up off the canvas after the blows of the sixties and being at that sort of beginning turning point of where the country, I think, is now. And Danilo as an innocent. I guess that can't sit well but that was the view of Danilo...

RW: The scene where he watches the burning of the American flag is striking because one suddenly realizes at that point how completely unaware he is of everything going on because he's kind of stunned by it.

AP: To have the non-politicized figure at the centre of the film is of course very hard to do but it was what we were attempting to do. That is to say in a highly political time, a non-politicized figure and one whose parents have left their political scene in Europe and have come here and brought him up in this American vacuum, and that's why he was interesting. It's a very hard task.

RL: Also he's growing up in the Midwest, in Indiana, bleak and culturally deprived. Georgia (Jodi Thelen) is seemingly some sort of catalyst in this situation—I'm not sure what Georgia's function is in the film. She has all these pretensions of dancing and being extraordinary. But Georgia never fulfills any of this and yet she has the function of being some sort of myth figure for Danilo. I'm not sure how the romance and the time it takes for them to come together connects with the political concerns and how Georgia fits into this.

AP: She doesn't really. She's just really quite the opposite.

It's hard for me now to recall our discussions. She was intended to represent the wildly reckless, ebullient part of the American spirit—no limits, no boundaries, no limit to her ambition, her expectations of herself, that sort of marvellous promise of America. Whether America ever fulfills it is still very much open.

RW: *I think a problem is that I take very little sense of promise from Georgia. She seems quite ridiculous and somewhat grating from the start. The first time I saw it I blamed Jodi Thelen for this as a performer but I'm now not sure how else it could be played. I think it's the way the role is written.*

AP: And directed...

RW: *I don't think so. I don't see how else, as written, it could be directed. I was puzzled that anyone would invite Georgia on a second date yet all these men are so fascinated by her.*

AP: Well, there's something about her, this alive raging spirit that's very attractive.

RL: *Both times I saw it she reminded me a bit of Liza Minnelli and in particular the Sally Bowles character in Cabaret, the kind of 'world is my oyster' attitude. She seemed directed towards imitating that.*

AP: That's very true. It's not Liza Minnelli I was using as the image, but Sally Bowles in *I am a Camera*, a creature in an alien society who just doesn't want to be held in by the limiting aspects of that society and zooms out of there and burns very brightly.

RL: *The film is called Four Friends—what about the other two friends? They seem to be almost non-existent.*

AP: That was a misnomer. I always wanted to call the film *Georgia* and in Europe it is called *Georgia*.

RW: *I think Reed Birney steals the movie. He has this extraordinary presence. What has happened to him? I've never seen him before or since.*

AP: It's a sad story of being the unusual actor and doing well and then not being able to be employed again. You have so many of these kind of cypher actors—who's that chap in *Star Wars*?

RL: *Mark Hamill?*

RW: *Or Harrison Ford?*

AP: One of the things that makes me laugh is Harrison Ford being nominated.

RW: *Mark Hamill is very good in The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia.*

AP: Really? Maybe he's learned something.

RW: *Of course he's never been allowed to do anything like that again which, of course, confirms what you're saying.*

AP: They want and expect Luke Skywalker. It's a terrible thing. Poor Jodi Thelen who is a wonderful actress, I think, and a most attractive person couldn't even work anymore. She got into a Neil Simon play and she lives in New York now because she wants to be in theatre.

RL: *Your films are frequently characterized by intensity and*

Four Friends (1981)



excess in confrontational situations. In *Four Friends* this excess seems almost to produce irony in certain scenes, for instance, the last appearance in the film of Lois Smith, where she identifies herself as wife and mother, both of which roles she has now abruptly lost, and utters that terrible scream. Such incidents seem abrupt and not contextualized in the way one expects from Hollywood narratives.

AP: What we undertook there, you see, was a kind of fractured narrative. We'd start the narrative off and then another voice would be heard—another narrative voice leading you into a sequence. We kept talking about change and discontinuous change, that's the technique of the film. And it was really to break the narrative—the expected narrative form. I don't know how to evaluate the attempt but I like the idea of doing a different form. I don't know whether we succeeded or not. There were certainly different opinions of the film. It has very strong supporters in Europe. Too many of them regard it as my best film. I don't think it is by a long shot. I'm always astounded when I hear that.

RL: You begin with Danilo's narration, then pass to that of the old woman and subsequently to the friend who is the son of the undertaker.

AP: I must say that I take responsibility for that. I imposed that idea on Steve Tesich. I thought that there wasn't enough thrust in Danilo as a central character, for him to be the narrative vessel in which the story would be contained. Confronting that fact, I thought that we should give voice to these other perspectives.

RW: I like that.

AP: I like that too. I don't know if it was entirely successful.

RW: I think the problem is that Danilo simply isn't very interesting. If the film could have been structured more on alternative narratives, giving other characters greater prominence and greater equality it might have been a much stronger film.

AP: I wish there had been a really radical voice in that film.

RW: I think the scene in the film which I dislike the most is the one intercutting the jolly folk dancing with the decadent party which seems to me making such an obvious point without any irony.

AP: Oh, I hope there's irony.
(laughter)

RW: It seemed to me an invitation for everyone to go out and participate in jolly folk dancing.
(more laughter)

AP: Oh god no—there's nothing I hate worse than folk dancing.

RW: But the contrast between the two seems so strong and so simple.

AP: I was talking about a kind of bonded culture, which brings over the mores of the old country and stays in this terrible, suffocating bond and about the broken, open forms of another kind of culture. Those were my intentions.

RL: Throughout the film Danilo vacillates between extremes. Is Georgia's function to draw him out of this pattern and effect a workable compromise? In the beach scene at the end of the film she tells him that next time it will be her turn to choose. She prevents him from retreating into his past.

AP: Yes, that closed, suffocating, homeostatic grouping.

RW: I think one needs Danilo getting more involved in Georgia's culture.

AP: Quite possibly. You see, I guess I was counting on his love for her, the unspoken part, the good part of Danilo

would come out. I don't know about the balances in that film. It was such a damned hard film to keep hold of. I probably lost control of it.

RW: It's very hard to keep hold of for the viewer as well.

AP: I don't know what it was then that spoke so passionately to the Europeans.

RW: But Europeans are so often right about American movies.

RL: Was the film commercially successful in Europe?

AP: Quite—based largely on the fact that it was so critically successful. Informally the critics get together and vote on the best film and they picked *Georgia*.

RW: We hear that *Target* has also been very well received in Europe. Is that true?

AP: I haven't heard. CBS, for the second time in my life after I made a film for them, goes out of business.
(laughter)

On *Little Big Man* they went right out of business, and on *Target*, so there's no one to hear from. It's apparently doing well but I never hear from anybody because there's nobody in charge anymore. Everybody was fired right as the film came out. They just disbanded the entire film unit.

RW: What was your involvement in *Target*? How did you get into that?

AP: I got into it because I just had the impulse to make a film. I'd been approached about a film called *Falling in Love*. Ulu Grosbard was working on *Target* at that time. When I was approached about that film I thought to myself, 'I don't believe this story one bit. I don't know anything in the world that can help this story.' Ulu's awfully good, and so is Streep—wonderful—and they couldn't make it work. And I wouldn't have done any better with it. If anything, I probably would have done less well. But by that point, my juices were already going to make a film. It's like becoming aroused in some way, you know, you get ready to go. And there I was in this state when I realized, in my discussions with them, that we were never going to reconcile our differences. I said, for instance, that there was no way the story could progress if the people were of the same social order. They are two people living in the suburbs and they are essentially the same person. It's really a story about someone falling in love with themselves. And they kept saying *Brief Encounter*, and I said no, *Brief Encounter* has class difference, and there's every difference in the world and why don't we split this and make one of them an urban dweller and somebody else a suburb dweller, but institute difference. But the folks at the studio couldn't see that.

RW: I don't know how it was set up in the first place but it looks like an old-fashioned star vehicle. They say, 'we've got these two stars under contract—as would have been the case back in classical Hollywood—we've got to make a film for them. Let's have them fall in love. He can be a commuter, she can be a commuter.'

AP: But that was not the case. Because neither Streep nor DeNiro was really in it yet. They wanted to work together again and along came this vehicle. They were all married then, Ulu was a great friend of theirs and Bing! So Ulu left *Target* which he'd been working on, and I was just in that state so Sam Cohen, who is our mutual agent, said 'Well, I don't know if you want to read this thing' and he brought *Target* to me. And I said that I thought it was attractive. Now I have to say that I was in this over-aroused state, I wanted to make a movie. And the fact that it was set largely in Europe was extremely tempting. A lot of other things came into play—the possibility of working with Hackman again...

RW: Was Matt Dillon already cast?

AP: No, Hackman wasn't even cast, but I thought Hackman right off the bat and that was so attractive. So, I haven't got apologies, I took it fully with my eyes wide open knowing the limitations of it, knowing the kind of film it was. But I thought also there was another part of it and this is a question of vanity. I thought, dammit, I'd like to show that I can do this kind of high-kinetic film, *action* movies. They're always talking about action movies—damnit I can do those, I can do them better than those damn whipper-snappers. People talk about action films and I think, god, they're really pretty awful. So it was one of the things I really imposed. I mean I wrote that whole sequence on the bridges in Hamburg.

RW: *In most action films one sits through the plot scenes in order to get on to the next action bit, but I think in Target the opposite is true. The Hackman-Dillon confrontations are the core of the film.*

AP: There was certainly a limitation inherent in that movie to that relationship—it couldn't go much beyond 'Gee Dad, you're not the guy that I thought you were.'

RW: *The film is very much concerned about families—the three families—the Hackman-Hunnicut-Dillon family, the lost family of Schroder, and the CIA, which is on at least two occasions referred to as the family. What were you trying to do with that and what is the relationship between the CIA as family and the other two families?*

AP: Ironic, in that instance. And ironic also in varying degrees with Schroder. For me, families contain such a variety of ingredients, some very good, some very bad, some very difficult. But I can't take the one about the CIA being called family too literally.

RW: *I think possibly a problem I have with the film is that the central family, the Hackman-Hunnicut-Dillon family, is so conventionally conceived. The film would be really interesting if it went further in trying to rethink the family and certain structures of the family, how fathers and sons can relate and how they relate to the woman. The film seems to be another of all these restorations of the father movies in which the father is re-instated as the seat of all authority and the son has to learn to respect him.*

AP: That's a perfectly reasonable criticism and one that I can't respond to except to agree with it. Unfortunately, it's not a film about the family, it was not intended to be about the family. It was a schematic film about how do we get into a kind of action sequence where people are bonded in this particular way, where father and son are bonded into a mutuality, but at no point, neither the beginning twelve or thirteen minutes, in Dallas, with the most conventional American family, was there an attempt to give that description of the family or the politics of the family. It was a simple-minded film.

RL: *Was there any consideration given to making the Hackman character more responsible? There is the whole thing where Matt Dillon confronts him with "did you kill people?". Hackman is evasive and more-or-less "no I didn't. I was just pushing a pencil" and he's taken off the hook rather quickly.*

RW: *He seems to admit that he was responsible for people's deaths.*

AP: Yes, he does. It's not an elegant and thought-through film. It was designed for quite other purposes on my part. I don't know whether it was a life crisis of my own, where I wanted to say that I was still alive and functioning. Maybe I was also taking as a clue the kind of mindlessness of other action films that are popular, in that I made it mindless without entering into any of the other considerations, which are the usual considerations into which I deeply enter and

which distinguish my films from other films.

RW: *Actually I wish you functioned like that more regularly, because everyone has the right to make two or three films that are below his best in order to make the great film. That's the way the old Hollywood worked. People kept working, but it seems so difficult to keep working nowadays.*

AP: I would like to go right on now and work on another film—my juices are flowing and I'm really *hot* to make some films, but the ones I *want* to make, I *can't* make.

RL: *Are you satisfied with Target in terms of what you wanted to do with it?*

AP: Yes I was, but I just *wish* that I could have put a disclaimer on that saying 'Don't take this seriously, it's just a movie.'

(laughter)

RW: *Since the sixties directors of your calibre are always expected to make masterpieces which never used to be the case. Lang could make half a dozen basically little B movies with no big stars, low budgets and often quite unpromising material, with which he often did wonders.*

AP: Yes, and Ford and Hawks, they all made terrible films.

RW: *Now every film that you or Scorsese makes is expected to be a masterpiece.*

AP: It's not going to be, and we're all incapacitated by that. What happens then is the studios will say 'don't go near Penn or Kubrick or Scorsese—you're going to get caught up in one of those arty intellectual films that's not going to be a money-maker. And it is a fact of present life. I don't know Stanley Kubrick that well, but he's trapped in it now. He can't make the films he wants to make. He *won't* make the films *they* want him to make and he's going through year after year of being unproductive.

RW: *This does seem about the bleakest period in the Hollywood cinema. There are so few films coming out now that I admire.*

AP: And even when there are, for instance gifted young people like Robert Zemeckis, the material with which they're engaging seems to me so unworthy of them. You can't *make* a good film out of *Back to the Future*...or *Romancing the Stone* is a well-made movie about nothing. They get away with it because they have nothing to live up to. Of course, this is no excuse. You go for so many years without making any money and you live in this community where people make *huge* amounts of money. By the time I'd made three or four films I hadn't made any money out of them. I was working with people who were getting fortunes and I had not made any money. The only money I ever made was in the theatre at that point. And by God you get to the point where, whatever the circumstances, you think "I want a piece of the pie or a piece of the apple" but you're biting into the fruit that eventually gets you trapped.

RW: *I suppose Scorsese comes as close as anyone to a director who's gone on doing what he really wants to do. His work continues to be so intensely personal and idiosyncratic. Somehow he seems to get away with these incredibly off-beat subjects like Raging Bull and King of Comedy.*

AP: And *After Hours*. But you know, with *enormous* disappointments. Right up to the wire they cancelled *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Heartbreaking!

RW: *They'd actually gone as far as scouting locations.*

AP: Those are *killing* to the spirit. At that point you're so committed. I admire Marty a lot. I admire his resilience, although I know he's paid a big price. There comes a point, too, when you think "I've got to *score*...I want another picture like *Taxi Driver*." Because otherwise you feel so immo-



Target (1985)

bilized because you can't get films made. The last two or three films were not mega-hits in the Hollywood terms. These guys are in there for a very short tenure. They have no memory, no knowledge of film, no interest really. They want to know what your last product did at the box office. I never thought that I would find myself defending the old Hollywood system.

RW: What about Dino DeLaurentis—he seems to have adopted Michael Cimino? Which is brave after *Heaven's Gate*.

AP: It was brave and Cimino came through for him in the sense that he did a very responsible job for him...fiscally...with *Year of the Dragon*. He's got a lot of skill. It's not a film that I liked.

RW: I think it has about half a dozen absolutely stunning scenes.

AP: And it has about half a dozen absolutely *abhorrent* scenes that I found deeply offensive.

RW: Well, it seems so totally unable to find any coherent attitude toward the leading character.

AP: The *givens* of the leading character are so grandiose as to make him impossible. He is the Vietnam hero, the most decorated cop of the police force...

RL: ...and a *Dirty Harry* type...

AP: ...and he's all of thirty-one or something. How did he do all that?

RW: And the casting of Mickey Rourke is all wrong anyway. I read the novel when I heard Cimino was filming it. It was

the most dreadful novel I've ever struggled through. None of the good scenes of the film is in it. I imagined Clint Eastwood in the part at his present age.

AP: But all I kept thinking was, how could this callow youth have done all of this? And the attitude towards women is despicable. The attitude towards sex is despicable.

RW: I'm never sure about that. It's all bound up with the film's inability to make its mind up about the hero. It's never clear to me when he's being endorsed and when he's not by the film as a whole. It's the women who are used to condemn him repeatedly and what they say is absolutely true.

RL: Except that the Ariane character goes back to him at the end, which doesn't make any sense at all.

RW: The ending is disastrous with the Mahler *Resurrection* Symphony on the soundtrack.

AP: Really dreadful. And after that rape...and then when somebody else rapes her, there comes that terrible 'vengeance is mine.' The fact that *he* raped her is overlooked. There is a kind of heavy-duty narcissism in Cimino which serves him well on certain occasions and serves him ill on others.

RW: All of his films are very confused. They're made with an extraordinary flare and an extraordinary passion but conceptually so confused.

AP: What I think he proved with this film is that he can stay within the boundaries of narrative. In *Heaven's Gate* there was a mastery demonstrated, but at the expense of the film. That roller-skating scene was breathtaking—

brehtaking scene after breathtaking scene but at the expense of certain characters, the narrative, and certainly at the expense of United Artists. There isn't an awful lot to celebrate at present in American film.

RW: *Part of the problem is that there isn't an awful lot to celebrate in America, and I think that's why somebody like Cimino has enormous problems, because the impulse behind his work always seems to be a desire to affirm. It's there consistently throughout his work, to affirm something, in terms of values and that's what's wrong with Year of the Dragon—he's trying to affirm something that can't be affirmed anymore, a system that's been discredited. And he should know that.*

RW: *Would you like some wine now?*

AP: Yes I would, thank-you.

RL: *Arthur, have you considered going back to the stage to work again?*

AP: I'm going, I'm going to do a play. It's a nice play, it's a terrific play called *Hunting Cockroaches*.

RW: *You could have some practice in this apartment. Just stick around 'till it gets dark.*

(laughter)

AP: I think that's true of anywhere...it's written by a Pole who's an emigre, and it's about Polish emigres in New York who are caught between their cultures, a nostalgia for the culture they left behind, but not a nostalgia for the horrors of that culture. But it's done in a most inventive, lively, unusual way—a free form. People come out from under the bed and start scenes and then go back under the bed and disappear.

RW: *When's it going to open?*

AP: I'm going to try it out this summer and we're going to do it in the fall. I don't know if this is just arrogance on my part, but I'm going to try to persuade the producer to go to Broadway. At this moment, my own impulse is to say, "let's confront the culture, with its *absence* of theatre, its *absence* of drama, its *absence* of films, rather than take the *other* way out, which is to go off-Broadway and to hope you'll get recognized. I think we should go right at it. Broadway has some wonderful theatre buildings, and we should change the landlord's grip on them. I can make a persuasive case for my position, but it's going to be *their* money. I don't know how well I'm going to be able to convince them but that's what I'd like to do.

RW: *As you're so involved in theatre, have you ever considered doing the kind of filming that Altman's been involved in, converting plays into films?*

AP: Certainly Altman is a very good model to use, someone who has always found a way around orthodoxy. I've got to do more of what *he* does. We're beginning to become quite good friends.

RW: *And a way of escaping from the twenty million dollar budget.*

AP: He moved to Paris while I was there making *Target*, and we saw a good deal of each other. He set up a place there with a cutting room in his house, and he brought Scotty, his right-hand woman, over and in his wonderful way, he really got right to work. He filmed from a Marsha Normand play called *Laundromat*. It's pretty good, it is just what it is, a one-act play on film. I don't have that kind of enthusiasm for those small pieces, but what I complain about in the theatre constantly is that I wish to God we had a kind of theatre where I could use my kinetic skills. I would like to do a sixty person mob scene, I'd like to do a big play with a lot of people, stuff that I can do in film. But the idea of going back to the kind of small playlet that I did

so many of in my television days—Horton Foote, Sam Shepard, Marsha Normand plays—doesn't seem appropriate. On the other hand, he's much to be admired, Altman is. He's indomitable, he never stops working, he's productive. What comes to mind is that Pauline Kael once said that the three most interesting directors working in American film, Altman, Scorsese and Coppola, are all three Catholics. And whatever other similarities she was talking about, there aren't very many of those people who are whole, those are injured, *injured* careers—*deeply* injured. There's something very wrong, the situation that nips these artists in the bud in that way.

RW: *An actor you should work with is Aidan Quinn.*

AP: Yes, he's good, isn't he. I saw *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and then I saw *A Lie of the Mind*, the Sam Shepherd play. Gee, he's good—he's sympathetic, tender, strong, I really liked him very much.

RW: *He's a sort of anti-Rambo.*

AP: He's certainly just popped into my consciousness. God, that's the most attractive young man I've seen in a long time on the screen.

RL: *Did you like Desperately Seeking Susan?*

AP: I did. I thought between the two of them—Madonna and Roseanna Arquette—they made one terrific character. But it keeps slipping in style.

RW: *I thought it was quite a nice little thing but it could have done so much more.*

RL: *I saw The Miracle Worker again recently. It's a wonderful movie. I hadn't seen it for a long time.*

AP: It's a movie about which I have pretty mixed feelings. I like what it does, and I like the fact that it's so emotional. There are parts of it that I thoroughly dislike.

RW: *It's the only film where I start crying before the credits begin.*

RL: *I think the structure is a bit awkward, the episodicness of the film doesn't quite work.*

AP: What doesn't work for me is that we have the family there being the antagonist, the obstacle, the very conventionality of that family, Captain Keller and all that struggle...

RL: *...yes and the Andrew Prine character with the reversal at the end where he stands up to his father and tells him he was wrong...*

AP: ...all that, you see, was effective on the stage and I just didn't have enough sense about cinema at that point to know that it shouldn't be in the movie, that the camera could tell us about that child's impediment in a way that we could never depict on the stage and *that* would be the eloquent antagonist the film should *rage* against, that *terrible* visitation on the child. The camera does it, and then to have people have to talk, when Annie says she wants to take her down to the summer house and teach her, and Captain Keller says "Two weeks, Miss Sullivan!"

RL: *That whole "two weeks" business seems so arbitrary.*

AP: You see, it was necessary on the stage. I didn't know enough when we moved it over onto film to reduce that aspect of it. So that part of it was theatrical in the bad sense.

RL: *One of the very nice things about it is that it is such a non-sentimental film even though it's such an emotional film. I felt that you really were avoiding the pitfalls of sentimentalizing the story. It's extraordinary to find in a film of the early sixties a character like Anne Bancroft's—a very wonderful, powerful woman who is still very human, again not compromised or sentimentalized in any way. The film was projecting*



The Miracle Worker (1962)

very strong images of women twenty-five years ago in a way that was very uncharacteristic of that period.

AP: Oh, totally. Anne came along there as a new kind of figure, a new kind of heroine, both in the theatre in *Two for the Seesaw* and in this play, carving out a new kind of early feminism for herself. She was remarkable, so gifted. Unfortunately, the theatre died, just as film is gradually dying—it died out from under her. Just not enough roles to keep her engaged.

RL: I thought Jane Fonda was actually quite good in *Agnes of God*. She created a role that was essentially non-existent, under-written, out of her own strength of presence, although I didn't like the movie, I thought it was quite awful.

AP: Jane Fonda is really a terrific actress, as Anne is. They're really up there. Jane can do some really remarkable work, though she hasn't always done it.

RW: Her career has been very unsatisfactory into the eighties. Even the things she's tried to develop herself, like *Nine to Five*, have been so compromised.

AP: And schematic rather than organic. They're not made out of passion, rather "let's talk about the working woman"...

RL: ..."but not offend anybody very much."

AP: We're really at a hard time. It's not just films, although I think films are the strongest and most exact model of what's wrong in America right now. I think nobody is doing good work.

RW: Part of the problem seems to be that protest has nothing very clear to focus on as it had with Vietnam and Watergate. I think the energy is there somewhere but it can't seem to be mobilized, and therefore any sort of left wing or radical position isn't popular, it doesn't make money, and we're back where we started with, with the businessmen and the accountants and the business deals.

AP: Every culture, at certain times, gets these kind of impoverished periods, I mean artistically impoverished, for a variety of reasons. I wouldn't begin to know how to diagnose this period because it's filled with enigma for me. I don't know anybody who really respects Ronald Reagan. But I also don't know anybody who isn't prepared to acknowledge that he's an engaging figure. So we're suddenly talking about "the great communicator," I mean this media figure. It's very hard for me and my friends to make sense of it. It's very peculiar. I watched it the other day on the State of the Union address. Absolutely beguiling, in which he was saying things that are absolutely impossible, we won't raise taxes, we're going to balance the budget, we'll maintain the high military budget—it's absolutely blue sky time. It's as if he was turning on the entire country with something he was smoking. But there we are. The politically astute columnists take exception to it but the people in the street don't. Up goes the stock market, and as somebody pointed out, Manhattan is a fascinating place that has thirty thousand millionaires and thirty thousand homeless.

RL: *We were talking about the Rocky and Rambo films and the resurgence of Russia as the monster. This seems a very dangerous game to be playing and nobody seems to want to take it seriously.*

AP: *It's a wonderful way of not looking at your own monster inside your own self. It's very good to lay off everything that's wrong with the world onto this alien tribe.*

RW: *The bourgeois media have always tended to link any left-wing position with the Soviet Union—a boogeyman that makes it even more taboo to adopt any left-wing position.*

AP: *On the other hand, it's very difficult to have a responsible left. As much as we can excoriate the right, we can excoriate the left. We haven't done a good job of it, those of us of that persuasion. We haven't done an eloquent job of trying to express what we see as a better culture, a better society. It's damned difficult, it's just damned difficult. We have a little playwright and directors' unit that we run at the Actor's Studio every Monday—Kazan and I started it and we have some very good people in it, Mailer is in it, and Don DeLillo—all of them, if you asked them, would define themselves as men of the left, including Kazan, very much so, and yet you don't see any work from any of us that helps to define what we mean by that. And that's pretty impoverished.*

RL: *The problem today seems to be a lack of focus, a kind of splintering. Take for example, feminism, which as a movement has become increasingly fractured, especially with the current*

pornography debate. And yet the Right, at the same time, is consolidating.

AP: *It's consolidating better than we are. The Right is consolidating, they've got a network, they've got spokesmen.*

RW: *And money.*

AP: *Money was never the power of the Left. It was really a force for social change, a sense of injustice. It wasn't money that unified the Left, but it's what gives the Right its peculiar power. And in this media time, they're able to buy visibility. But I think we're at a philosophical deficit. It's very hard to say feminism is a big enough issue to militate the Left.*

RW: *Because the dominant ideology has made sufficient allowances for it.*

AP: *It's wonderfully resilient.*

RW: *You make a few movies like An Unmarried Woman and you've dealt with feminism, you've said, "Oh yes, that's fine, the family is great." That's just one tiny example. Yet I think there is a certain amount of consolidating going on in intellectual circles, anyway, which is at once preserving things, and developing them, ready for when society wants them.*

AP: *Well, I wish I really felt that. I don't.*

RW: *I think the whole coming-together of the Freudian and Marxist traditions and feminism is very interesting. It's happened in the last ten years or so.*

AP: *Yes, but there's also, it seems to me, another kind of movement at foot. There was just a piece in the New York*



The Missouri Breaks (1976)



The Missouri Breaks (1976)

Times Magazine—something about the Yale critics. There's a big movement afoot there, and I can't begin to explain it—they're called deconstructionists. But it seems to me that at the level of criticism, and probably at the level of the art that invokes the criticism, the issues are not being dealt with, the social issues are simply not the currency of our time. I mean even feminism is only one part of the issue—one cut of the pie.

RW: *The whole semiotics—structuralist tradition that has led to deconstructionism has become so academic, so hermetic.*

AP: Yes, absolutely.

RL: *And there's such an enormous and widening gap between the intellectual elite and the world at large.*

AP: Oh, it's huge. You probably don't see it as much over here, but to walk around Manhattan and see the homeless, the hungry. It's just appalling. I saw a woman pick a carrot out of the gutter on Columbus Avenue where now the rents for a store are twelve, fifteen thousand dollars a month. You know, money is flowing on that street, and here is this woman picking a filthy carrot out of the gutter in front of a Korean vegetable store. It's very peculiar—society is so hard to describe.

RL: *And this is presented by the media as quaint—"bag ladies are characters."*

AP: And if they really wanted to do they could be running a salon or something. And the truth is that these people are *desperate*. We've got genuine psychotics walking around. I mean, the double bind that's given to these poor people—"We'll let you out of the asylum if you promise to get your own medication." That means be your own keeper, which is what they weren't able to do in the first place. So there they are, people who, in order to save money, the entire culture has cut loose from any kind of help, except that they can go and get free Thorazine. It's terrible, *terrible*. And the increase and frequency of that, it's just amazing, it's hard to walk a block in New York now without seeing someone sleeping on a grate or in a doorway. There's a kind of heartlessness to our society that's really shocking.

RL: *That extraordinary juxtaposition of extreme wealth and extreme poverty...*

AP: ...and maybe in there lies some clue to Rambo. If you're going to do anything about it you do it yourself, you become super-muscled and super-powered and super-armed and you go out there and by yourself you blow the system apart. Because the system is going to deceive you. I mean the figures in Rambo, on whose behalf he is supposedly doing this, are *also* the ones who are responsible for deceiving him, so there's *nobody* to be trusted. I saw *Rambo* on an airplane and I couldn't *believe* it, I *literally* couldn't believe it; I was just appalled.

RW: *I see fewer new films now than ever before.*

AP: Yes, I can imagine, and that must be terrible for you.

RW: *I used to enjoy going to the movies so much and now it's at best a duty, at worst a punishment.*

AP: There must be another and better way.

RW: *I hope so.*

MAX: Meow. Meow!

RW: *Tell us about The Missouri Breaks*

AP: It was a situation where each of us had read the script and turned it down. I discovered this later. And Elliot Kastner got together with any two of us and he would say to Brando, "I've got Nicholson and Penn to do this, will *you* do it?" When Brando agreed he said, "I've got Brando and Penn to do this, will *you* do it?" And pretty soon, we were all locked into it. It seemed so *unreal* that I didn't really pay much attention to it, and lo and behold, the deal was made. And from that point on, from the making of the deal to starting the film, it was six weeks. So what we did was go to Montana and build the principal house, and we used a lot of leftover sets from *Little Big Man*, which were still standing around. They weren't in very good shape so we propped them up and then we started to make the movie. And a lot of each day was spent fleshing out scenes, which were extremely sketchy. That was the best part of the movie, watching these two guys improvise and develop scenes, but we always knew that we didn't have an ending. One of the cleverest solutions was Brando's. He said, "I don't understand who this character is so I think he should be somebody different every time we see him." And I quite agreed with him. I didn't know how to play a regulator either, this dispassionate killer...at least in *Shane*, they gave him a costume, they gave this terrible black vengeance motive. The fact of the matter is, we had a very good time making the movie, although we *did* have a sense that we were sinking, and then of course, when we got to the ending, we knew we were *drowning*. And that's when I called Robert Towne and said, "Bob, come and help, I'm desperate, I don't know

what to do." He wrote the ending that we have. It's not much of an ending, but it's the only ending we could work out, given what we had.

RW: *Was the script actually incomplete?*

AP: No, there was an ending of sorts, but it just petered out. The really interesting thing is that the writer, Tom McGuane, had recently made a movie for Elliot Kastner called *Ninety-Two in the Shade*, and Kastner, for some reason that I've never understood, had suddenly decided that McGuane could recut it himself. The recutting took place in England while we were shooting the film, so McGuane left the States and went to England while we were waiting for the ending. I don't know quite why that happened. I should ask Elliot some day. I haven't seen him for quite a while.

RW: *Another film made around the same time, written by McGuane, Rancho Deluxe, has almost exactly the same structure as The Missouri Breaks. Rather oddly, given your description of the making of the film, Missouri Breaks comes across as far more serious.*

(laughter)

AP: *Rancho Deluxe* is more of a piece, but it's more frivolous.

RW: *It doesn't have any of the disturbing elements that Missouri Breaks develops, irrespective of whether you were just having fun or not.*

AP: Oh, we were taking it seriously, but we knew we were in a very leaky boat. Terrible things were written in the press, terrible stories were being filed from Montana that Nicholson and Brando were at one another's throat and that I was having a terrible time with them. Absolutely *none* of it was true. We had a very good time.

RL: *Was Brando's love scene with the horse in the script?*

AP: No. It's a marvellous scene. Brando said, "Give me a horse and a mule and let's go, let's try it." And all I had to do was keep the camera going. I knew there was going to be no stopping him once he started. Ten years ago you could shoot a film in that manner. You couldn't do that today.

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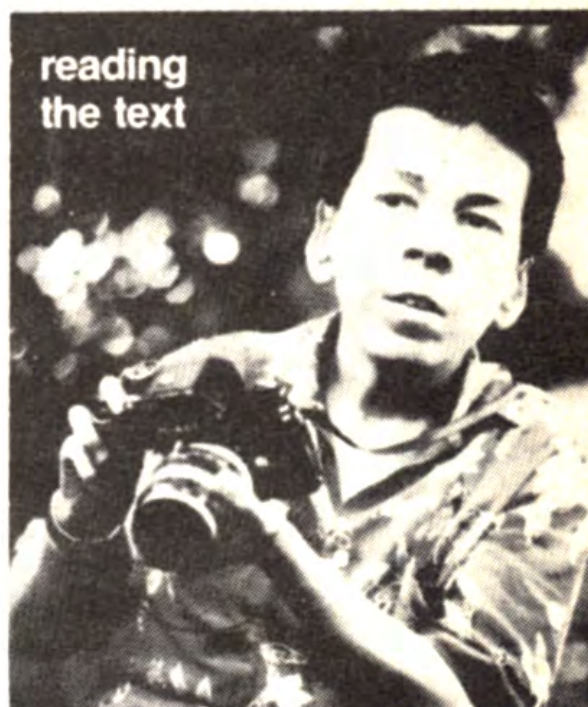
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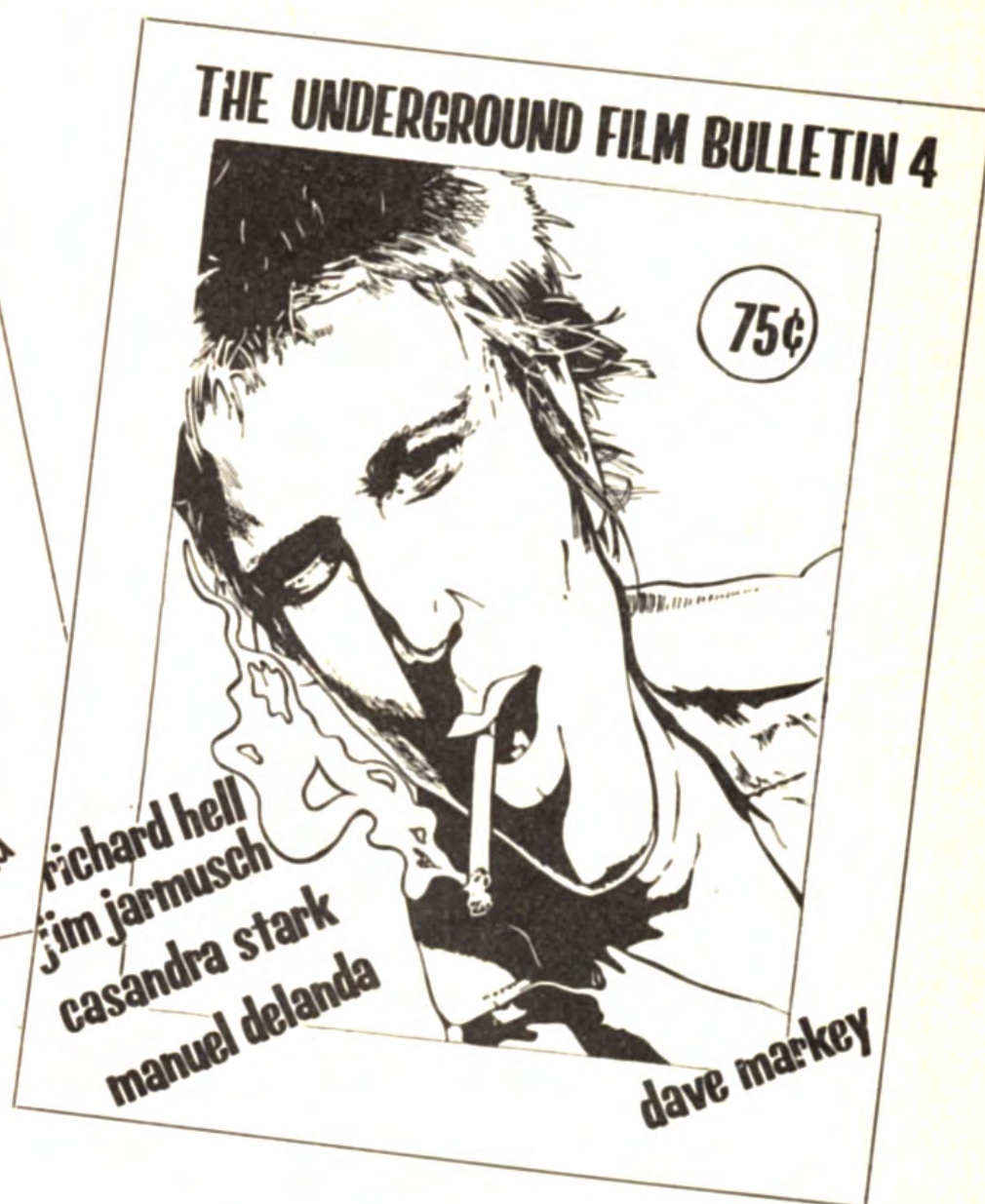
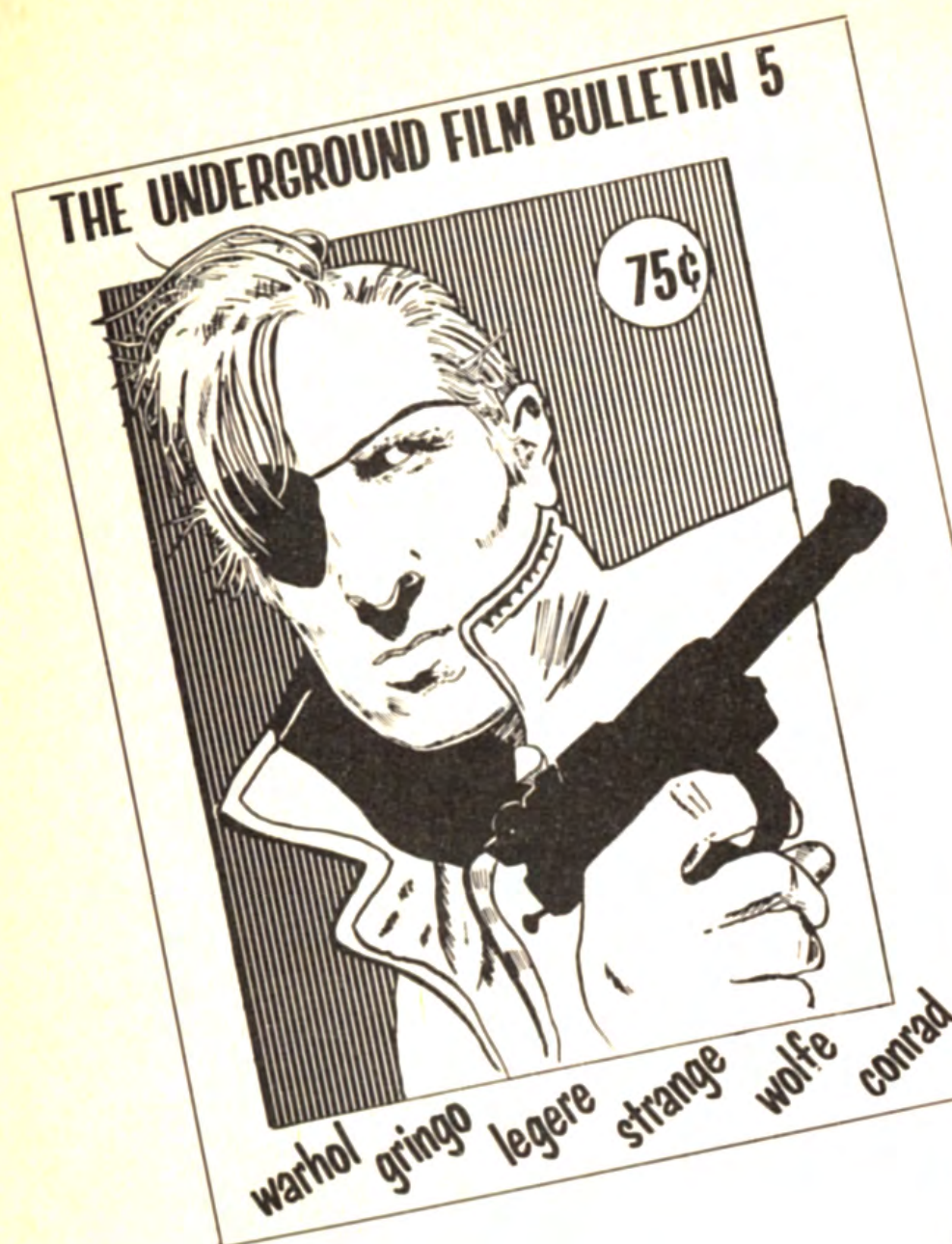
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pissing on

the cinema of transgression

by Bryan Bruce

Walking in the East Village on a recent visit to New York City, I noticed a xeroxed poster for a Super-8 film called *They Eat Scum* by Nick Zedd to be screened at the Pyramid Club later that same evening. I had heard of the Cinema of Transgression, heard its other compelling monikers—Ordeal Cinema, Cinema of Endurance—was intrigued, and decided to experience it for myself. It was to be screened at 10; I arrived at 10:15; they told me it would be more like 11. Eventually the

audience was in place, the music turned down, and the projectionist/film-maker busy threading up his work. A few images began to make it to the screen, unframed and flickering out of the sprockets. I could make out a man in bondage whose face was being smeared with what looked like excrement, then a grotesque nuclear family at the breakfast table—an abusive, nagging transvestite mother arguing with the hideous father and snivelling child. I thought to myself that it could be an interesting film, but at that point the projector broke down completely and, without apology, Zedd noisily packed up his equipment, yelling something about a screening later in the week at another alternative space.

Out of context, the images that I saw did not offend or disgust me, at least not on any aesthetic or moral grounds; nor did the obviously crude, low-budget, sub-B quality turn me off the film. Contrarily, I found this seemingly more democratic, less corporate approach to film-making exciting: a film forum for artists who cannot or choose not to produce art under the confining, depoliticizing auspices of governmental patronage; a form which anyone with a cheap Super-8 camera and some tape could participate in, encouraging, as in the Punk movement, a more egalitarian, interchangeable relationship between artist and audience; an expanded cinema in which art forms converge in various permutations in spaces not traditionally associated with film—bars, clubs, galleries. In theory, it seemed like the most interesting film movement to come out of New York since Warhol.

Now that I have seen a number of films of the Cinema of Transgression and read *The Underground Film Bulletin* (UFB), the xeroxed 'zine put out by Transgression's purported founder, Nick Zedd, aka Orion Zericho, I have had to reverse my initial enthusiasm to the point of condemning the movement outright. I want now to examine the multiple reasons for my dismissal of the movement despite its annexation of certain potentially effective political strategies of the Punk movement.

The Cinema of Transgression, as a kind of expanded Cinema, is more accurately a sensibility than a style of film, and one which, like the several sensibilities from which it borrows—Surrealism, Camp, Punk—eschews precise definition and accountability.¹ These sensibilities have in common the strategy of offending or provoking through gesture, positing a pure polemic that is, at least initially, depleted of a specific politic. Surrealism, for example, accomplishes this by disengaging the symbol from representational meaning, using a disturbing or disgusting image not for its symbolic resonance, but for its purely offensive or disruptive impact; the surrealist narrative, with its arbitrary and illogical connections, is not meant to be read for latent significance, but experienced for the state of confusion and disorientation it generates. The Camp sensibility, while less intentionally confrontational, similarly relies on exaggerated and extravagant gesture, and a preoccupation with artifice and stylization. Although to its credit it has become increasingly politicized, the Punk movement shares this strategy of the politically non-specific, polemical gesture designed to provoke and challenge the existent codes of morality and ethics. Like Surrealism and, especially, Camp, Punk plays particularly on the sexual as the most morally contentious arena by fetishizing the gesture (in fashion, for example, through piercing, leather and chains, dog collars and leashes, borrowed from the practice of bondage and discipline—this can be construed as a more politically articulate than simply confrontational statement if read as a metaphor for dominant sexual practice). Each sensibility, then, relies on extremity and excess, and lays emphasis on experience over analysis of the extreme images it presents, ridiculing any attempt to account for them ideologically.

As part of the strategy of polemicism, Surrealism, Camp, and Punk play on the ambiguity of their images and gestures—inconsistency, contradiction, and unpredictability becoming part of the aesthetic. A notorious example in Punk is the appropriation of Nazi imagery in fashion or dress.² If, as in Surrealism, the symbol is meant to be taken as a pure confrontational gesture, the political significance of wearing a swastika shifts: the gesture has offended as intended and should not be read further.³ Obviously, the purposive ambiguity of this strategy runs the danger of being misinterpreted, which is precisely part of the effect intended; Punk continually strives for the inappropriable, which means finding forms of expression that are not easily accounted for or diffused. It would be difficult to come up with a more loaded 'symbol' than the swastika, and the initial shock of seeing it incorporated in 'fashion' is perhaps its central function. To some, however, the reading of the sign is indelible—these punks are irresponsible, fascistic, pro-Nazi. Punks almost encourage such a misreading, and refuse to articulate the meaning of their stance, partly because people want it explained not so they can engage the reasons for radical and subversive expression, but only in order to render it harmless by mastering it intellectually. If one looks at the Punk movement as a whole, and at the subtext of this willful inarticulation, the gesture has a much different significance.

Firstly, Nazi artifacts were usually worn by punks in conjunction with the fetishized sexual iconography of chains, leashes, leather, etc., and served the same function—to turn bourgeois normalcy back on itself, identifying the master/slave relationship, most hideously apparent in Nazism, as the basis of patriarchal culture. It is difficult for people to accept something as seemingly mundane and ordinary as the dress code as a means to a critique of culture, especially when the majority dresses either as a passive reflection of it—gender differentiation, conservatism—or as a purely personal statement. Secondly, adornment with such offensive icons signifies a certain distance from the conventional presentation of personal image, affording a very immediate expression of alienation. By wearing the chains of their oppressors—swastikas, crucifixes, hand-cuffs—punks consistently display the reality of their enslavement by the dominant ideology, and the distance felt from it and their own identity within it. The punk gesture exploits these icons not as an empty aestheticization (as in some current fashion trends which use swastika patterns in fabric purely decoratively) or as an indication of an adherence to or promotion of their most obvious significance, but as a politically radical project which demands a reading beyond superficial appearances.⁴

The ambiguity of image just described introduces another quality shared by the three sensibilities: the element of play. As Susan Sontag says of Camp, "The whole point . . . is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious."⁵ Using confusing and contradictory images, as in Punk, inverting them, as in Surrealism, or exaggerating them, as in Camp—all are instances of this playfulness, and can be a particularly effective method of dismantling critical analysis.

The final paradox of the three sensibilities, which they, themselves, tend to ignore, is the perhaps by now obvious point that being apolitical is in itself a kind of political statement, and that every act, gesture, or image, now matter how apparently insignificant, does signify, even if only an emptiness. This brings us back to the old *Cahier du Cinema* conceit that every film is political, and to the task of defining precisely *how* a film or film movement is political.

If one were to define the political nature of the Cinema of Transgression according to the categories set out by *Cahier*

critics Comolli/Narboni in their "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism", it would fall approximately under 'category (c)', films in which, "The content is not explicitly political, but in some way becomes so through the criticism practised on it through its form".⁶ Formal considerations here include both the films themselves—the super-8 format, the cheap, low-budget quality, the grainy, poorly lit or over-exposed images, dictated most often by economic necessity—and the context within which they are presented—the expanded cinema approach, combining films with live performance, supplementing them with underground publications, etc. In theory, it is an exciting venue, one which throws into question the traditional means of the production of cinema. Specifically, however, the Cinema of Transgression, while reacting violently against the established and entrenched avant-garde, commercial film school dogma, the government-funded film-maker, and the cloistered academic critic, fails to produce an articulate voice in opposition to them, and, instead, has become itself monolithic, an undifferentiated gestalt of anarchist angst as apolitical as the worst of the traditional avant-garde.

It is the peculiar quality of the Cinema of Transgression to appropriate the tendencies of the traditional institutions it condemns, and to become itself highly appropriable, despite its avowed intentions. In his Cinema of Transgression manifesto, Orion Zeddo (Zedd) rails against every institutionalized instance of cinema without recognizing the affinities of his movement with them. Part of the problem is his inaccurate and misplaced assessment of the avant-garde. He denounces structuralism as a "monument to laziness" perpetrated by an "entrenched academic snobbery," but does not address the obvious problem of structuralists producing apolitical, purportedly transcendental or mystical art legitimized by virtue of 'pure' form. Indeed, this same criticism can be levelled at the Cinema of Transgression; its repetitive and purely gestural images of violence and sexual perversity become as meaningless in their isolation as the patterns and grids of structuralism.

THE CINEMA OF TRANSGRESSION MANIFESTO

WE WHO HAVE VIOLATED THE LAWS, COMMANDS AND DUTIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE; i.e., TO BORE, TRANQUILIZE AND OBFUSCATE THROUGH A FLUKE PROCESS

DICTATED BY PRACTICAL CONVENIENCE STAND GUILTY AS CHARGED.

WE OPENLY RENOUNCE AND REJECT THE ENTRENCHED ACADEMIC SNOBBERY WHICH ERECTED A MONUMENT TO LAZINESS KNOWN AS "STRUCTURALISM" AND PROCEEDED TO LOCK OUT THOSE FILM

MAKERS WHO POSSESSED THE VISION TO SEE THROUGH THIS CHARADE.

WE REFUSE TO TAKE THEIR EASY APPROACH TO CINEMATIC CREATIVITY; AN APPROACH WHICH RUINED THE UNDERGROUND OF THE

SIXTIES WHEN THE SCOURGE OF THE FILM SCHOOL TOOK OVER.

LEGITIMIZING EVERY MINDLESS

MANIFESTATION OF SLOPPY MOVIE MAKING

UNDERTAKEN BY A GENERATION OF MISLED FILM

STUDENTS EMULATING THE

FAILURES OF PROFOUNDLY

UNDESERVING NON-TALENTS

LIKE BRACKHAGE, SNOW,

FRAMPTON, GEHR, BREER,

etc.; THE DREARY MEDIA

ARTS CENTERS AND

GERIATRIC CINEMA CRITICS

HAVE TOTALLY IGNORED THE EXHILERATING

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THOSE IN OUR RANK--

SUCH UNDERGROUND "INVISIBLES" AS

ZEDDO, KERN, TURNER, KLEMMAN, DELANDA,

EROS & MARE, AND DIRECT ART LTD.,



Zedd seems to believe that the only objection to the extreme images produced by the Cinema of Transgression is the queasy, moralistic one, taking offense to the form itself. What *really* offends is the irresponsible use of these images, the assumption that they represent, intrinsically and out of context, a politically cogent statement. As with pornography, the images of sexual transgression or merely explicit, unstimulated sexual acts should not be condemned in themselves; but neither, in themselves, do they constitute an effectively radical stance. It is the specific context within which they are placed that determines their precise meaning. Pornography can be reactionary or progressive; one has only to look at the non-exploitativeness of certain gay pornography or personal pornography produced outside the limitations of the commercial porn industry.

The proximity of the Cinema of Transgression to *objectionable* pornography is all too apparent in Richard Kern's *The Right Side of My Brain*, starring the Queen of Transgression herself, Lydia Lunch, who appears ad nauseam both in the films and each of the five UFB's published thus far. The film is of some interest formally, the black and white images and Lunch's disturbing music reminiscent of Maya Deren (again, an affinity with the established avant-garde which the movement spurns). But the effect of the images, described in the UFB as "the psycho-sexual fantasies of a sexually insane girl", including Lunch giving Jim Foetus (of Scraping Foetus off the Wheel) a blow job and being battered by Henry Rollins (of Black Flag), is inseparable from pornography that exploits women, despite the attempt at legitimization under the banner of the "art film" label or the strategy of breaking taboos. Misogynistic images of women being degraded by and submissive towards men which saturate virtually all heterosexual pornography inescapably inform the reading of this kind of unarticulated material. On the opposite extreme, other contributions by Lunch, such as a comic strip in UFB #5 in which the female protagonist takes a man's head up her ass and subsequently eats him for dinner, are typical of the Movement's unconscious fixation on the stereotypical castrating female

(also apparent in Kern's *Manhattan Love Suicides* and Scott B.'s *Last Rites*), a common Camp cliché, and revulsion with natural bodily functions. Lunch has done better work for the Movement, such as her music, performance, and text for Zedd's own *The Wild World of Lydia Lunch*, but with *The Right Side of My Brain*, she has unfortunately presented herself as the Madonna of the New York avant-garde.⁸

The use of homosexuals, transvestites, and transexuals in the films of the Cinema of Transgression is equally problematic, typical of a certain tendency of the avant-garde to use such extreme characters out of pure formal interest, as in Camp, or merely to offend or provoke. Taking an example from outside the Movement, the uncontextualized transvestites of Ross McLaren's *Baby Green*, minutely explored through close-ups and the slow motion camera, are perhaps meant to be disruptive of gender roles, but the emphasis on form and technique diffuses the radical gesture. Placed in isolated subjectivity, these images remain marginal, freakish, detached from any social or political reality. The mainstream easily subsumes this kind of strategy as the carnivalesque—the release of a controlled amount of radical energy in order to ensure the continued existence of the status quo. The Camp treatment of sexual deviance, or its association with violence and hysteria, evident in Kern's *Manhattan Love Suicides* or, outside the Movement proper, Mark Rappaport's *Chain Letters*, does little to change dominant attitudes towards gender transgression, and worse, serves to substantiate clichés used to account for and contain these characters.

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Although Zedd insists that the Cinema of Transgression is unique in history and owes nothing to the traditional avant-garde, the movement is most definitely an East Village phenomenon, and symptomatic of the exhaustion of the New York art scene. In such an environment, in which art has become unreasonably privileged, in which the expansion, acceleration, and exhaustion of art form has out-paced radical content, the appeal to transgression is lost. The Movement has produced nothing that has not been done before by Warhol, Paul Morrissey, or Jack Smith; Zedd even emulates the Warhol art star persona, gathering groupies and acolytes (Zedd-heads) consisting of, according to *Zat*, "Cute teen-age film students and affection-starved transvestites... noticeable by their distinctive trademarks of scowling faces and skin tattooed with bruises, bitemarks, and razor cuts sometimes bearing the name Zedd and other obscene slogans".⁹ This kind of personal, offensive gesture is, again, borrowed from the Punk movement, another influence that Zedd does not acknowl-

edge. The fanzine format of the UFB is taken directly from Punk, the home-made fan magazine format for Punk groups consisting of interviews, reviews, pix, comics, and ironic material reprinted from other publications, put out by any Punk who has something to say and access to a xerox machine. Like Punk fanzines, the UFB reacts against the New American Right/Moral Majority, but is as contemptuous of the established left, and can be characterized by a certain anarchistic, anti-authoritarian ethos with a vague leftist slant, and a concentration on the ironies and paradoxes of dominant culture.¹⁰ Zedd also borrows the Punk strategy of using pseudonyms to subvert the cult of the personality, a gesture which is lost, like most of his other Punk stances, by his art star posturing and East Village egomania.

As a reaction against an article published in the *Village Voice* by C. Carr¹¹, which describes the films of Ela Troyano (*Bubble People*, *Totem of the Depraved*) as instances of the Cinema of Transgression, Zedd has produced in UFB #5 a diatribe against the two women which underlines the worst aspects of his position. Firstly, by refusing to include Troyano's films as part of the Cinema of Transgression, Zedd is attempting to confine and control a historical movement, failing to acknowledge that other film-makers may be working along the same lines owing to similar historical and ideological determinants. As I argued initially, the use of the polemical, offensive gesture can be traced to such movements as Surrealism (what is Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* if not transgressive cinema?) or to the specific influences of New York film-makers (the films of Scott and Beth B., Bette Gordon, Jim Jarmusch, Mark Rappaport, etc. anticipate or run parallel to those of Kern, Zedd, DeLanda, et al); if Zedd coined a term for the movement, it is not therefore his exclusive invention or property. Secondly, Zedd's sexist (and racist) comments emerge as clearly in his editorial as their unconscious inscription in his and fellow Transgressor's films, sufficiently, I would venture, to dismiss the entire Movement.

The Cinema of Transgression, in presenting transgressive characters—homosexuals, transvestites, artists, criminals—who are self-absorbed and self-destructive, may be geared to a particular audience that recognizes these stereotypes, but there must be a responsibility attached to creating any image in a public forum. Scott B.'s *Last Rites*, for example,¹² based on the Grandma Barfield case, is typical of the Movement's use of characters and events that are in themselves absurd, descriptive of the schizophrenia of American culture. The added twist of the transgressive sexualization of this material only achieves, as critic Greil Marcus says of certain Dadaist strategies, "... a discontinuity that by virtue of its noise is easily grasped and as easily deflected...".¹³ The film intercuts a confessional account of a woman on death row talking of her crime directly to the camera with a tracking shot of the tea kettle, tea, poison, and finally the dead husband, whom she fucks at the end. The interesting idea of inverting necrophilia, usually designated as the ultimate instance of female passivity, here empowers the woman, but only in the context of utter psychosis, augmented by the actor's campily bad performance. This extreme and "noisy" gesture becomes, in effect, indistinguishable from the *National Enquirer's* sensational treatment of the same material. The final mantra-like line of the film, "in my mind I live forever", could be the Cinema of Transgression anthem. Films such as *Last Rites*, *The Right Side of My Brain*, and *Manhattan Love Suicides* indulgently emphasize phenomenological perception and privilege utter subjectivity in such a way that suggests the Movement's apathy and ennui with the idea of effecting any real political or social change. It is, ultimately, empty noise.



Zedd flattering himself in *UFB 5*.

Notes

1. I have used the term 'sensibility' rather than 'movement' partly to account for Camp. Surrealism and Punk can be defined as art movements (the former in painting and cinema; the latter in music), and Punk as a political movement, although "movement" perhaps implies an organization and direction which these phenomena lack. Camp is less a movement than a particular way of looking at art, a taste: it appropriates art movements retroactively, after they have been isolated and distanced by history. (Art Deco and classical Hollywood cinema are typical examples.) The term 'sensibility' also evokes, as Sontag phrases it, "the realm of purely subjective preferences, . . . mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason" ("Notes on Camp", *A Susan Sontag Reader*, Vintage Press, 1983, p. 106), a definition which accommodates the emphasis on pure gesture, violence, and sexual excess in Surrealism, Camp, and Punk, and their contempt for rational analysis.
2. A punk would be less likely to use the term 'fashion' owing to its connotation of bourgeois commodification; non-punks are quick to point out how much time and apparent pride punks invest in their appearance, which speaks of fashion over utilitarian dress. The idea of uniform perhaps expresses the attitude more accurately.
3. The unfortunate existence of truly fascist/c, neo-Nazi elements within the Punk movement such as the National Front in Britain unavoidably affects the reading of this kind of gesture.
4. This account of the Punk incorporation of Nazi imagery does not account for every instance of the gesture, but rather, is meant as an attempt at reading the movement in general. In support of this, punks such as Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols, when approached by the National Front to support their fascist platform, rejected the offer to the extent of discontinuing their practice of wearing swastikas.
5. Susan Sontag. "Notes on Camp", *A Susan Sontag Reader*, New York, Vintage Press, 1983, p. 116.
6. Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni. "Cinema/ Ideology/Criticism", *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, p. 26.
7. *The Underground Film Bulletin* #4, p. 48.
8. Kern's "can't you take a joke" defense of the film in question is a further instance of not taking responsibility for the images he has produced.
9. *Zat*.
10. Two local (Toronto) fanzines, *Hide* and *Dr. Smith*, are much more politically articulate than the average 'zine, particularly concerning gay and feminist issues.
11. C. Carr. "Notes from Underground" *The Village Voice*, Vol. XXX, no. 50, Dec. 10, 1985.
12. Again, this is a film that Zedd might not recognize as part of 'his' movement, but which obviously comes out of the same sensibility.
13. Greil Marcus. "The Cowboy Philosopher", *Artforum*, Vol. XXXIV, no. 7, March, 1986, p. 91.

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Notes for the Exploration of Hermosillo



Matinee: the hold-up.

by Robin Wood

I discovered Jaime Humberto Hermosillo—the man and his films—at a recent film festival organized and generously hosted by the University of Guadalajara. Hermosillo is clearly an important figure in contemporary Mexican cinema, crucially because his films are often very good, but also because of what is happening around him: his creativity appears to have become a catalyst for the creativity of others, and there has formed around him a strikingly harmonious and enthusiastic group, film-makers and critics, male and female, straight and gay, amounting to the kind of creative workshop out of which very interesting things can be expected to develop. The festival was built around a Hermosillo retrospective: I was able to see eight of his films within five days, an unusual opportunity to begin to come to grips with a complex and (to me) hitherto unknown body of work. I must stress 'begin.' I don't as a rule write about a film unless I have seen it at least three times (preferably six); in this case I saw the films only once each, and half of them were innocent of subtitles (I have no Spanish). What follows, then, must be regarded as the most superficial and provisional of overviews, instantly disposable when the films become accessible outside Mexico (as surely they will).

The editors of this issue have assured me that the term 'alternative practices' can be interpreted loosely. Its strict sense would, I take it, refer to attempts to construct cinematic languages in opposition to the dominant language (centred on Hollywood). In the context of world cinema, Hermosillo's work scarcely constitutes an alternative practice; it does, to a degree, in the context of Mexican cinema. The films have been financed and produced independently, and for the most part have not received wide distribution or popular acclaim. The problem here seems primarily that of the Mexican distribution system, which offers little space for independent products; most of Hermosillo's films are readily accessible, and the festival audience's response was markedly enthusiastic, the most recent film greeted with a five minute ovation from a packed

house. Anyone looking to the films for embodiments of avant-garde practice will look in vain. The relationship to Hollywood is constant, though at the same time ambivalent and idiosyncratic. Hermosillo's allegiances are to mainstream directors and popular genres; the way in which those allegiances are realized is invariably off-centre, personal, and highly inventive.

The films demonstrate repeatedly a thesis that has underlain several articles in *cineACTION!*: that progressive and radical work can be produced within mainstream cinematic forms, given propitious circumstances. Such circumstances (economic, social, ideological) today barely exist in Hollywood, but they appear to flourish in Mexico (or at least in Guadalajara, where Hermosillo now makes his films)—to flourish, that is, within and despite material constraints (sometimes palpably apparent) of budget and shooting-schedule: since 1971, Hermosillo has been able to make 12 feature films. What is most immediately striking about the eight I saw is their combination of unity and variety. They express a coherent attitude, an underlying nucleus of thematic concerns; they imply an awareness of political, feminist and gay issues without ever being directly 'about' them; with the possible partial exception of *Les Apariencias Enganan/Deceptive Appearances*, they are not 'thesis' films and are never didactic. At the same time, they encompass a remarkable range of subjects, genres, tone and formal method. If none is a masterpiece, none is without interest, and the best are very good indeed.

If I begin with *Confidencias/Confidences* (1982), it is because it marks one pole of Hermosillo's range, being the closest of the eight to anything that could be termed 'experimental' cinema. My grasp of it was at best partial. The French-subtitled print we were promised failed to materialize; aside from a few extras in the supermarket scene, there are only two characters, and the film consists entirely of their conversations. Invoking the 'power of positive thinking,' I decided to concentrate on the film's formal aspects; though concentration was twice interrupted by Hermosillo himself, who, worried that I must be bored to distraction, tried to

interest me in a tour of the local market.

He told me subsequently that his intention had been to make the entire film in sequence-shots, each scene filmed without a cut (there would have been about 15). The realization of this was defeated by the low budget, short shooting-schedule, and the human fallibility of the two splendid actresses. The formal project was, however, evident from the first scene, a sequence-shot lasting about seven minutes, and, alerted by this, I attempted to count the shots. I made the total 43 (some of which are brief cutaways to close-ups of one or other of the actresses, to 'cover' a moment when strict temporal continuity collapsed and the scene couldn't be reshot in its entirety); I may have missed one or two cuts because despite my incomprehension of the dialogue, the narrative became quite engrossing. The adoption of the sequence-shot as formal principle (there remain perhaps five single-take scenes in the film, including a scene in a supermarket of considerable virtuosity) enables Hermosillo to explore systematically all the possibilities of movement and reframing within the shot: panning, tracking, zooming; the range from long-shot to close-up. Yet the camera movements are never fussy or there for their own sake. There is no question of an autonomous formal system of the kind so assiduously sought after by Noel Burch: the reframings, changes of distance, decision as to whether one character or both are in the frame, etc., are always at the service of the dramatic development.

The characters are a wealthy middle-aged woman and her servant; the plot concerns the attempts by the former (afraid of growing old and losing her beauty) to live vicariously through the latter, whom she seeks to dominate and manipulate, the film moving steadily towards the servant's rebellion and departure. There are clear enough echoes of distinguished literary sources (Strindberg's *The Stronger*, Genet's *The Maids*), but also, characteristically, of the melodrama, in which the mistress/servant relationship has so often played, in various forms, a significant role (Minnelli's *Madame Bovary*, *The Reckless Moment*, *Madame de . . .*, *Beyond the Forest*). Hermosillo brings the relationship from the margin of the films to the centre,



Hermosillo directing *Dona Herlinda y su Hijo*.

exploring all its possible permutations from supportiveness through unhealthy complicity to open antagonism. The film thereby explores issues of gender, class and age through the examination of a single relationship. I think, although both women are Mexican, one might add race: the mistress is blonde and fair-complexioned, the servant black-haired and dark-skinned: one thinks at times of the Bette Davis/Donna Drake relationship in *Beyond the Forest*.

The integration of narrative and formal system becomes readily apparent towards the end of the film. The moment when the servant at last begins to assert herself against her mistress is marked also as the point where, for the first time in the film, *her* movements rather than the mistress's determine the movements of the camera: the mistress sits writing, the maid paces backwards and forwards behind her, and the camera, which pre-

viously would have remained fixed on the mistress, now follows the movements of the servant.

Confidences carries to its extreme what is in fact a constant feature of Hermosillo's work, the fondness for the long take with multiple reframings (if the art of *mise-en-scène* has, under the influence of TV-style one shot/one idea shooting, all but died in Hollywood, it is being resurrected in Mexico, and without the least sense of pretension or self-consciousness). One sees this clearly in *La Pasion segun Berenice/The Passion according to Berenice*, an earlier film and one of Hermosillo's best (1976). Here the sequence-shot is the exception rather than the rule (I was aware of only two really extended examples, i.e. complete scenes lasting five minutes or more), but the function of the long take in Hermosillo's work becomes clear: the definition of a very precise relationship between the

action and the audience, playing continuously on a tension between distance and involvement. One of the sequence-shots, a restaurant scene occurring about two-thirds of the way through the film, can stand as exemplary. At the outset of the narrative Berenice, motivated by sexual repression, frustration and desire in roughly equal measures, determines to possess the handsome Rodrigo. The restaurant scene occurs at the point where they are at last negotiating a love affair (with desire and resistance, in different forms, on both sides). They arrive in the entrance and move across the restaurant in the foreground of the image, the camera tracking their progress. But the restaurant is full; they have to go to the back to wait for a table. The camera, however, now becomes static, leaving them to move into long-shot while the foreground is occupied by a table at which two young men are finishing their meal. The soundtrack continues to give us the dialogue of Berenice and Rodrigo; the young men, though much closer to us and engaged in continuous conversation, are inaudible. The expected cut to an intimate two-shot of the prospective lovers is rigorously withheld. They then move forward to the mid-ground of the shot to hover conspicuously over the young men's table. Finally the young men leave; the couple sit down, regaining the foreground of the image; but the camera remains static throughout their lengthy duologue, resolutely resisting the 'pull' of the standard shot/reverse-shot figure that would 'suture' us into the action. Throughout the shot Hermosillo plays on the spectators' (unconscious?) expectations of the ways in which dialogue sequences are traditionally shot; the varying distance (determined more by the movements of the actors than of the detached, almost impassive camera, and by the refusal to cut) offsets the tendency to identification implicit in the scenario.

With its commitment to the thematic of the woman's melodrama, its adoption of distancing techniques, and above all in its fondness for very striking and complex mirror-shots, the film reminded me a great deal of Sirk; certain other aspects, particularly the character of Berenice's godmother, an oppressive and grasping old capitalist who relentlessly conducts a money-lending business from her sickbed, evoke Bunuel. Common to Bunuel and the melodrama is the theme of repression/frustration erupting in violence and destruction. The film is a significant addition to the catalogue of works associating women with fire, on which I wrote in *cineACTION! 2*: it begins with a nightmare of the fire in which

Berenice's husband perished (and which perhaps she started), and ends with her covering her godmother in credit-notes and paraffin and walking away from the blazing house, an image of desperate and terrible self-liberation.

I have the impression that *Matinee* (1976), another of Hermosillo's best films, is shot more conventionally, but I may be wrong: it is very difficult to hold together all aspects of a film on one viewing, and I became so fascinated by the progress of the narrative that my attention to formal elements lapsed. It offers notable examples of another frequent characteristic of Hermosillo's work, the abrupt shift, within what appears to be a stable generic framework, of tone or narrative movement: a feature that brings to mind certain early films of the French New Wave, but which may have a common source in Renoir, another of Hermosillo's favorite directors.

The film opens somewhat in the manner of a Disney-type kids' action movie, though without a trace of cuteness or sentimentality. Two little boys, close friends, repeatedly play truant from school to attend matinees at the local movie house, which feed their longing for excitement; the older supplies lurid myths of Mexico City, where one can relish the daily spectacle of bank robberies and bloody corpses in the streets. When he gets a chance to go there with his father to deliver furniture in a

giant truck, he helps the younger boy to stow away.

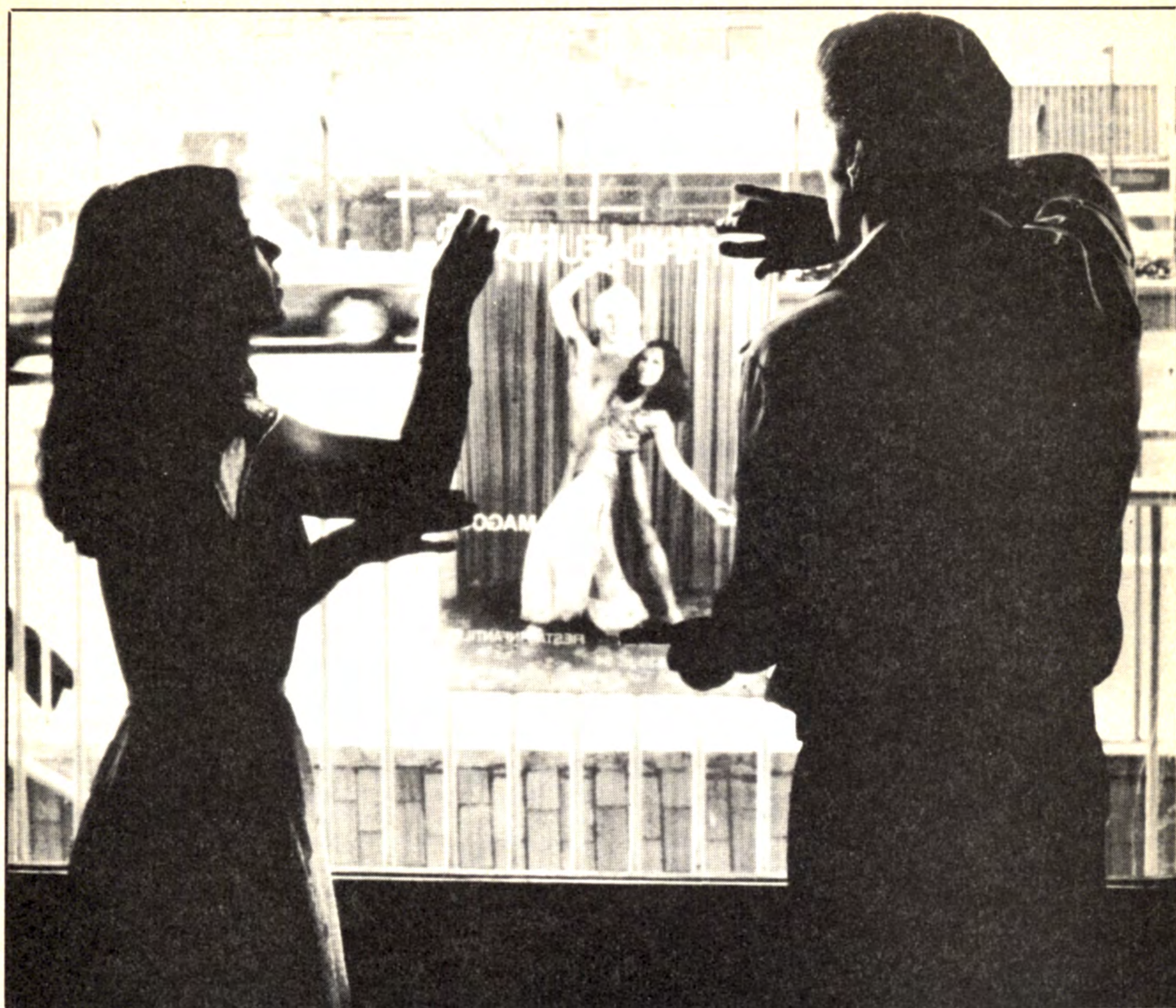
So far, everything seems secure—or dangerous only to the point permitted by the genre, to titillate us before the preconceived resolution. The truck is then held up and taken over by a gang of incompetent robbers, who need it to conceal the smaller van in which they will escape with the loot after a robbery: the development, treated initially as comedy, seems at first sight simply to indulge the boys' fantasies. The younger, hidden amongst the furniture, knows nothing at first of what is happening, but the older automatically falls in with the robbers, participating in the robbery as an accomplice. The robbery itself is again played as comedy, but suddenly modulates into a scene of violent death: the robbers are now killers. From that point, nothing is clearly predictable and, clinging to our generic expectations, we are repeatedly cast adrift. From kids' action movie the film shifts into the male-buddy road movie sub-genre à la *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*: two different but not necessarily incompatible sets of conventions begin to interact. The children become increasingly committed to the robbers (who have, after all, partially resisted the process of socialization which the boys have not yet completed). This commitment transcends both the violent death of the father and the break-up of the gang; one gang member adopts

the younger boy as his 'private secretary.' It is around this point that suggestions begin to accumulate that the two remaining gang members are lovers—the logical implication that the Hollywood buddy-movie has consistently found it necessary to deny. *Matinee* was apparently not the first Hermosillo film about a gay relationship and neither is it the last. What is striking here is the total lack of fuss or self-consciousness with which the theme is treated: there is no dramatic moment of revelation, the fact is simply allowed to emerge, as something perfectly natural that need surprise no one. Hence homosexuality never becomes an 'issue,' and the film sees no need to adopt a pro-gay (or anti-gay) stance, or to project positive (or negative) images of gayness: for once, it is treated as just part of the natural order of things. The four-way relationship between the two men and the two boys develops intricate patterns of jealousy, commitment and betrayal; the tone shifts increasingly towards the tragic, while still retaining elements of comedy. The climax—a disastrous attempt to rob a church that results in the death of both men, disguised as priests—is capped by the ending: the children are welcomed home as heroes, and the younger expresses his continuing commitment to the man he loved by refusing to participate in the celebrations.

The film that carries the principle of

La Pasion segun Berenice: Martha Navarro and Pedro Armendariz Jr.





Maria de mi Corazon: publicizing the magic act.

the shift of tone to its extreme—basing upon it its entire structure—is *Maria de mi Corazon/Mario of my Heart* (1979). According to Hermosillo, the shift in tone was inspired by a book called 'El Cine de Hitchcock,' in which the author argues that fundamental to Hitchcock's work is the sense of the precariousness of everything and the eruption of the unpredictable. *Maria* enacts this in its central moment, on which the whole film hinges. The first half is predominantly light and playful, almost whimsical. We watch a man, Hector (Hector Bonilla, one of the stars of *Matinee*) perform a burglary then come home to find Maria (Maria Rojo, the servant of *Confidences*), his former lover, in his bed: she left him for another man, who has now jilted her. When he asks how she got in she replies that she is a magician. She in turn is puzzled by the peculiarities of his apartment: no food in the fridge, but an

immense collection of disconnected blenders, mixers and other gadgets. When she subsequently realizes that he is a thief, she persuades him to reform and join her in her magician's act. They rediscover their love for each other and develop a seemingly idyllic existence: a relationship of equality and perfect mutuality, a career in which work and play become virtually synonymous. One settles back comfortably to enjoy what appears to be a relaxed, somewhat inconsequential, undemanding entertainment. It would be unfair to give away the turning-point (it's even a pity that the film cannot be described without revealing that it *has* one, since—unlike in *The Birds*, for example—there is absolutely nothing to suggest that the tone will change). Suffice it to say that the wish-fulfilment fantasy of the first half turns in a matter of minutes into the nightmare of the second, a nightmare relentlessly sus-

tained to the end with a narrative logic that overrules doubts about 'real life' plausibility. The effect is to force a reconsideration of the first half and of the couple's 'perfect' relationship, a love that, remaining at the level of play, never penetrated to any deep trust or understanding.

Far more obviously Hitchcockian is *El Corazon de la Noche/The Heart of the Night* (1983): if *Berenice* represented the felicitous meeting of Bunuel and Sirk, this might be seen as the meeting of Bunuel and Hitchcock—though it must be added that Hermosillo's films are never parasitical, that he seems always conscious of his influences and uses them very idiosyncratically. Here he takes up a nucleus of Hitchcock's thematic and stylistic preoccupations: romantic obsession, as a young man (a driving instructor) follows and spies on a young woman who fascinates him; the use throughout

this part of the film of point-of-view/identification techniques; the descent from a world of secure daily normality into a strange dark underworld discovered to exist within it; sustained pursuit and suspense sequences. Here, the object of the man's obsession is a deaf-mute, and the underworld into which she leads him (presided over by her blind father-figure) is a mysterious organization of the mutilated. The film develops strong mythic overtones: a variant on Orpheus and Eurydice, but also on Oedipus, with the boy killing the Father and trying to escape with the woman, only to discover that in order to keep her he must himself accept mutilation and become the father he has killed. There is a remarkable, unnerving chase sequence, with the couple, totally naked, pursued through a deserted market at night by legless cripples charging down the aisles on wheeled boards (Bunuel meets Tod Browning!); it is followed by a very Hitchcockian comedy/suspense scene in which the couple take refuge in a party which is then gradually infiltrated by the pursuers.

One of the most interesting aspects of the film (apart from its commendable anti-sexist equalizing of male and female nudity, still rare in mainstream cinema) is the way in which Hermosillo effects a reconciliation between Hitchcockian point-of-view editing and his own fondness for the long take. At a number of moments we are given what is clearly a shot from the young man's viewpoint; he then, however, enters the frame and the camera eventually turns to incorporate him in the action, the looker becoming the looked-at within a single shot. The result is a new version of (or variation on) the characteristic tension between involvement and distance. Hermosillo dislikes the film, regarding it as one of his mistakes. I'm not so sure. Certainly at the end one is left somewhat at a loss: it is not clear what it all amounts to, one experiences a certain emptiness. Yet I continue to find it strange and haunting.

About *Les Apariencias Enganan/Deceptive Appearances* (1978) and *Amor Libre/Free Love* (1978) I have little at the moment to say: they were shown towards the end of the festival, I had reached saturation point and, lazily, didn't make notes. Both relate clearly enough to Hermosillo's preoccupations. The former struck me (I may be quite wrong) as the coldest and most schematic of the films, the kind of thing an artist produces when he feels a need to tell us more explicitly what his work is all about (in this case, various aspects of sexual ambiguity, the illusoriness of

gender-roles, the possibility of sexual reversal). A plot summary might suggest *Myra Breckinridge* territory, but the film is completely devoid of 'camp.' *Amor Libre*, although it quite lacks Rivette's formal innovativeness, might be retitled 'Celine and Julie Go Screwing.' It concerns two very sexually active young women (Julia and July, in fact) who try to practice the 'free love' of the title and find it more complicated than they bargained for; there were no subtitles and I became somewhat bemused, but the point seems to be not the undesirability but the difficulty of breaking with a traditional sexual ideology.

In his most recent film, *Dona Herlinda y su Hijo/Dona Herlinda and her Son* (1984), Hermosillo takes up a theme of special significance in Mexican culture, the close mother/son relationship. The festival provided an ideal companion-piece in the promising debut-film of a young director Arturo Villasenor, who has worked on some of Hermosillo's films and plays a small role in *Dona Herlinda: La Felicidad de la Senora Consuelo/Senora Consuelo's Happiness* (1985). The two films complement each other perfectly, Villasenor's economical half-hour movie presenting the darker potentialities of the relationship in a concentrated study of unhealthy mutual dependence in which the mother's happiness is only

complete when her son is crippled in an accident which the film suggests he may have willed. The complementary nature of the films is cemented by the fact that the mother in each is played by the same actress, Guadalupe del Toro—herself the mother of another promising young director, Guillermo del Toro, represented in the festival by a delightful short black comedy, *Dona Lupe* (1985).

The impression of the Guadalajara group as an extended family, with Hermosillo as the most benign and non-oppressive of fathers, is confirmed by *Dona Herlinda*, in which many of its members turn up in bit parts, giving the film something of the relaxed feeling of a family party. It can perhaps be claimed as the first authentic gay comedy within commercial cinema (it just precedes *My Beautiful Laundrette*): a comedy (as opposed to a 'social problem' movie like *Making Love*) centred on a gay relationship (instead of on a 'straight' character as in *Partners*) which is neither put down (as in *Staircase*) nor marginalized in favor of a heterosexual couple (as in *Victor, Victoria*). Executed with unfailing poise and confidence, the film is a comedy of bourgeois manners, at once affectionate and satirical. Dona Herlinda, a widowed upper-class matriarch, has two ambitions, (1) that her son Rodolfo should be happy and (2) that he get married and have a baby. The only apparent obstacle is that he is in love with a young male music student. The mother, undaunted, proceeds to nego-



Amor Libre: equalizing male and female nudity.

tiate (a) the incorporation of the lover into the household (and into her son's bedroom) and (b) the son's marriage to a liberated, politicized woman with whom he has a longstanding affectionate relationship, who wants to have his baby but also values her independence. Much of the humor arises from the fact that, while everyone knows what is going on, and knows that everyone else knows, the proprieties must be rigorously observed. A characteristic moment (with a characteristically witty use of foreground and background within the shot): the young men are working out together on an exercise-machine in the garden; they get carried away and begin to make passionate love; Dona Herlinda enters the background of the image in long-shot bearing a tray of refreshments; the men's body movements shift back to the rhythms of exercise; the mother smiles approvingly as she approaches. The film moves towards a happy ending in which everyone is satisfied. Dona Herlinda has her household, her son and her grandchild, the wife goes off to study in Europe for a year, leaving the baby to be nurtured by the gay couple. No acknowledgement has been made by anyone that anything in the least unusual has taken place. The film, receiving its Guadalajara premiere, completely captivated a large mixed audience (many had to be turned away from the first screening). The presentation of the gay relationship is so totally unapologetic that the spectator is really left no option but to accept it.

The above account seems to demand one further comparison, with *La Cage aux Folles*: certainly a comedy, certainly centred on a gay relationship, and partly concerned with poking fun at bourgeois mores. But *La Cage* is far from my idea of an *authentic* gay comedy. Its gay couple is offered (offered up, one might say) as comic spectacle for the straight bourgeois audience, and of course we must never see them making love. Hermosillo's film presents its audience with two very handsome and attractive young men who, while they generate comedy around them, are never presented as funny, pathetic or grotesque in themselves; and they get to undress and make love within the first few minutes.

So what claims do I wish to make for Hermosillo's work, and what is the likelihood of our being able to see the films outside Mexico? One problem is that there is so far no incontestably major, definitive work, or one of those 'revelations' on which international reputations are initially based (the two are not necessarily the same thing).

With each film Hermosillo sets himself a limited objective, a specific narrative problem to be solved or situation to be explored, with no pretensions to offer a grandiose metaphysical statement (which often proves illusory anyway) in the manner of a *Rashomon* or a *Seventh Seal*. Though, as I have indicated, I find individual films excellent, the body of work—its range of subject, narrative, tone, genre—is more impressive than any of the films considered individually. As for distribution, I see one obvious problem that derives not from the films' limitations but from their very specific *kind* of interest. Despite the efforts of much serious film criticism over the past 30 years to undermine it, a fairly rigid dichotomy still persists in our film culture between 'art' and 'entertainment,' popular and 'serious,' a dichotomy that Hermosillo's work implicitly rejects. Excluded from the general release circuit by their foreign language (not to mention their frequently disturbing idiosyncrasies), the films conspicuously lack those signifiers of 'art-icity' that art-house distributors (not to mention most reviewers) generally require before they will promote unknown directors. The obvious route for the films to take is that of the festival retrospective. I would add that the films seem to me an admirable model for the kind of lively independent work that *ought* to be possible in Canada. The question of why we have no Hermosillo of our own (in terms of mainstream narrative cinema I can think of no Canadian who has produced a comparable body of work) is one that probably cannot be answered in terms of either individual talent or economics: it seems rather a matter of relative intangibles like 'social climate' and the state of film culture.

This leads me to a few final words about the Guadalajara group that has developed, rather in the manner of organic growth, around Hermosillo and his films. Most of its members are young, several are still students, and it has close affiliations with the university; it was inevitable that I should come to compare it with the Canadian situation, in so far as I have experienced it. Two features struck me particularly. First, there is a real sense of community, of a creative workshop in which ideas are exchanged, enthusiasms developed, excitement generated. Second, these are people who actually love movies. I have often noted as a curious characteristic of many Canadian production students that, although they want to make films, they appear not to love, or even be very interested in, the cinema. If this perception is

accurate, or has any general validity, the motivation behind the desire to make films becomes very dubious. In Guadalajara this love of cinema seems, again, to emanate originally from Hermosillo himself: his own work is saturated in the sense of a mainstream cinematic tradition that includes Hollywood but is by no means restricted to it (his eyes light up at any mention of Renoir, Rossellini, Rivette . . .), a tradition the films at once further and creatively interrogate. Canadian students seem partly inhibited by a particularly sterile and stereotyped concept of 'originality' that actually makes them afraid to explore freely the tradition of the art they propose to practice, in case they are somehow contaminated by it; the predictable result is that, lacking any critical perspective, they are completely at the mercy of whatever happens to be fashionable, from contemporary Hollywood sci-fi through rock videos to the latest trends in commercials. The absent factors—sense of community, love of cinema—cannot be made to order: it is doubtful that even the most excellent film school can construct them by itself, though obviously it can contribute. They depend on a whole complex of shifting and only partly definable social influences, a fertile soil and a propitious climate.

Meanwhile, I shall continue to look to Guadalajara with interest, where such a climate seems already to have evolved.

Jim Smith



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Planting Pictures:

a discussion of the films of William D. MacGillivray

by Peter Harcourt

Linda Joy was a young woman whose love-of-life shone from her like a beacon. With radiant eyes and glistening teeth, the energy of her person animated every expression that crossed her face. Her beauty and vitality informed every gesture. I didn't know her personally, but I know her now, at least her hands and face, as an image preserved for us within a film.

Linda Joy is the latest film put together by the Maritime filmmaker, Bill MacGillivray. I say "put together" because *Linda Joy* is a film that was begun by Linda herself. As co-ordinator of the Atlantic Filmmakers' Co-operative in Halifax (AFCOOP), she knew many filmmakers, including MacGillivray. A few years ago, while still a young woman, she developed breast cancer. She refused the obvious as she tried to refuse the disease. She refused a mastectomy. The film that she wanted to make would have documented the battles she fought with the medical profession; and at the time she conceived the film, it would also have documented her triumph over her disease.

This project was not to be. Within months of what appeared to be a successful operation in Toronto, removing the lumps but not the breast, the cancer returned in a galloping form and within six weeks she was dead.

Prior to this relapse, however, she had visited her friends at the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers' Co-operative (NIFCO) to discuss with them her script about her struggle. Evidently, they said much the same thing as MacGillivray had said: just tell your own story! So one day, she did just that. With Mike Jones on camera, Linda told her story in a series of single takes. Shortly after that, she fell ill and died.

While there was some talk amongst Linda's friends about using these "interview" takes as part of a larger film, utilizing stills from the past and perhaps filming some other incidents, it was Bill MacGillivray who decided not to do this. He wanted

to take the footage, select what was most meaningful and, by re-working it on an optical printer, discover a structure that would be both a tribute to Linda and a satisfactory film.

Through doing so, MacGillivray has produced an exceptional film. *Linda Joy* is a masterpiece of minimalist filmmaking. By utilizing only these out-takes from Linda's life, all interspersed with slow fades to black, MacGillivray has devised a beautiful and vital construction that tells the story of a woman's fight with death. The only additions consist of a few black-&-white freeze frames which appear as Linda moves towards death; and then, over black leader, MacGillivray's sensitive account of his last visit to her in hospital.

He speaks about his intense friendship for her—virtually his love; and yet he knows now that there is nothing that he can do. This spoken story—Bill's story—links Linda's story in a way to her social surround and counterbalances her visual exuberance with his own subdued speech.

The opening image of *Linda Joy* is a freeze-frame of Linda's smiling face, with her hands thrust before it in the form of a trough. Her hands not only form the "v" sign appropriate for a woman but they also register the moment before the clap that will serve as head-sync for the film.

After her hands snap together to establish the sync, MacGillivray lets her tell her stories; and after he has told *his* story about her death, he brings her back to life for a moment. We see Linda, once again in colour, proudly displaying the scar on her breast which is the mark of her fight against mechanical surgery and the affirmation of her own vitality.

Whether or not a full mastectomy might have prolonged her life, the film doesn't make clear. In terms of the film, however, it doesn't matter. Linda Joy was a woman, ebulliently full of life, who contracted cancer and who then took a stand against what the medical profession automatically proposed for her as she took a stand against her disease. *Linda Joy* is a film that embodies a record of that struggle. In its social referents, it is a documentary—indeed, *cinéma vérité*. In the authority of its construction—through its step-printing, deliberate changes of

mood, authority of rhythm, and through the delicate balance it achieves between image and sound—it is transformed into a minimalist fiction film. *Linda Joy* is no more. *Linda Joy* survives as the depiction of a struggle—a struggle universalized by the way that it has been presented. In its quiet way, *Linda Joy* is a “perfect” film.

*

Is it only a coincidence that *Linda Joy* bears a small stylistic resemblance to the first film that MacGillivray ever made—*7:30 A.M.* (1972)? His diploma film for the London School of Film Technique (now the London International Film School), *7:30 A.M.* is a simple exercise both in the handling of actors and in *mise-en-scène*.

A man enters a bathroom, showers, dries himself, trims his beard, deodorizes one arm-pit, sniffs at the other but leaves it dry, and exits from the room. Meanwhile, we see in the margins of the frame a woman also come in, sit on the toilet, have a pee, and exit from the room. There is not so much as an exchange of glances between them, and, while the film does contain cuts, there is a strong feeling of an extended sequence shot within this ten-minute film.

Shot in 35mm, black-&-white, *7:30 A.M.* already declares some of MacGillivray's pre-occupations. He is an assured stylist as a creator of images; he is at ease in working with actors; and he is capable of achieving maximum effect with minimal means. Furthermore—perhaps the limitation of his early work—MacGillivray's universe is at this stage very much centred on the male.

*

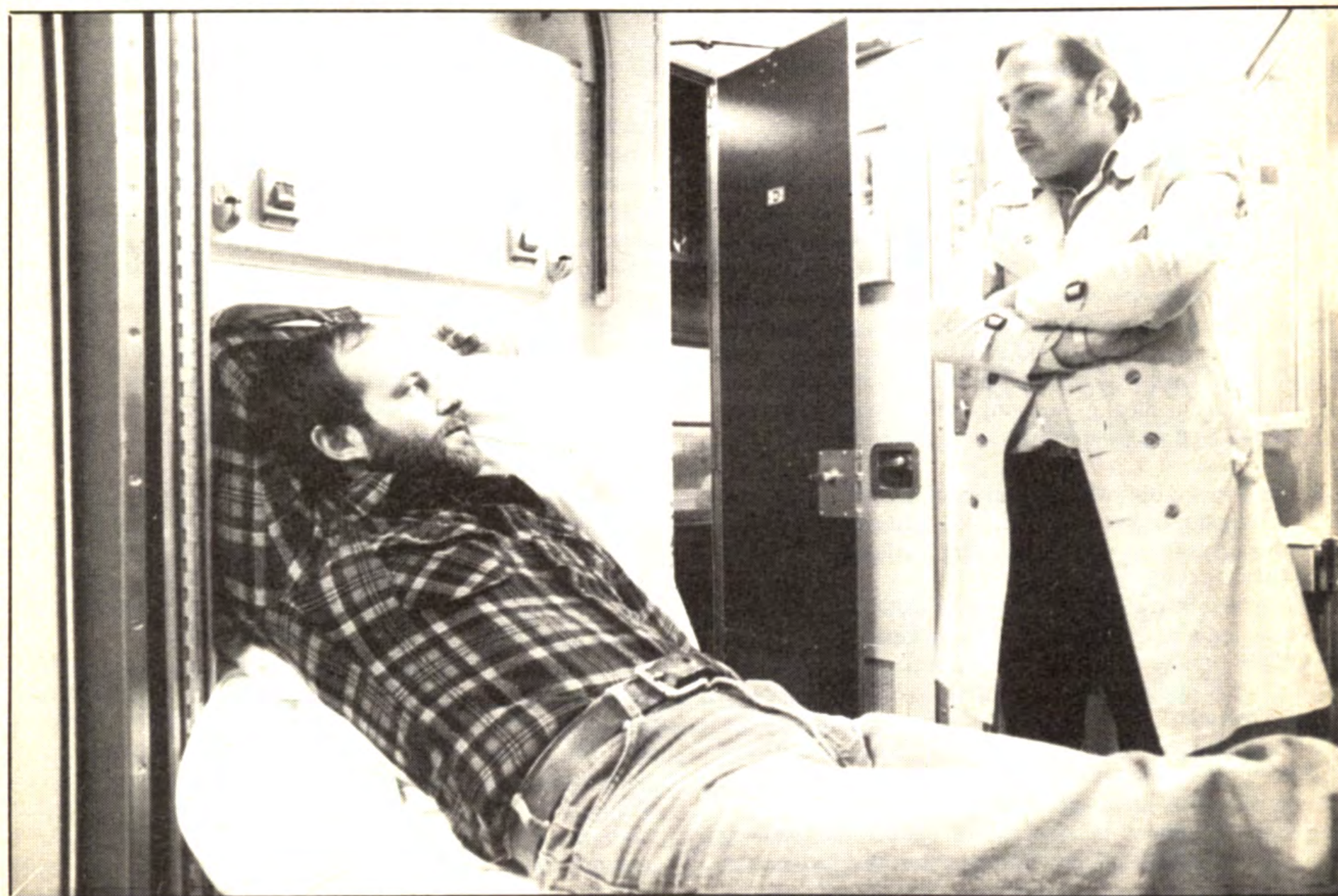
Within the pages of *cineACTION!*, the films of Bill MacGillivray might not readily be considered political. There is nothing in his work that partakes of the academic Left. Yet in a very real way, in a way that is essential to the regional struggles within Canada, his films *are* political. While they don't fit the established models of radical political thinking, his films embody the political struggle of the regions against the centre and of the personalized cinematic utterance against the homogenized language of the cinematic machine: of the movie business, as one says—a business that generally either by-passes or co-opts the Canadian reality.

For instance, when MacGillivray returned to Canada after his training in Great Britain, he got involved in a regional movement that, supported by the Canada Council, resulted in the founding of a series of film co-operatives across Canada. Along with Lionel Simmons, MacGillivray's co-worker and cinematographer, and Gordon Parsons, often MacGillivray's producer, MacGillivray was directly involved in the founding of AFSCOOP in Halifax, out of which, after *Ariel View*, his next film, he founded Picture Plant, his own production company.

Ariel View (1979), a 60-minute *moyen-métrage*, and *Stations* (1984), a full-scale feature film, constitute MacGillivray's chief dramatic work to date. He has made other films—largely sponsored films like *The Author of These Words* (1980), a documentary on the Newfoundland writer, Harold Horwood, made for the National Film Board; an item called *Newfoundland at War*, made for Parks Canada; plus another item for TVOntario on Alistair McLeod—but it is through *Ariel View* and *Stations* that, along with the recent miracle of *Linda Joy*, his work can best be introduced.

What are the elements that characterize this work, that make it political and that make it Canadian?

Mike Jones and Joel Sapp in *Stations*.



To begin with, it *is* regional. To make such a statement is inevitably to endorse the "realist" dimension of cinema as well as to underline one of the confusions within the Canadian political situation.

Both *Aerial View* and *Stations* are rich in landscape, in the sense of a particular region with its unique sense of scale. In *Aerial View*, it is the specific space of Halifax and its ambient coves; in *Stations*, it is the stretch and breadth of Canada as seen from a train.

If, for a central Canadian, to visit the Maritimes is to visit the past, watching these two films might seem like going back in time. This continuity with the past is what troubles the political surface of MacGillivray's work. It scarcely fits any of the currently progressive paradigms. Yet this feeling of regional identity—whether from old-fashioned Halifax or new-fashioned Edmonton—is central to the sense that Canadians have of themselves as Canadians. Furthermore, within the Canadian struggle for cultural autonomy, arguably it is "progressive" to encourage regional voices to be heard, as it is to encourage a knowledge of our past.

Along with this presence of regional landscapes, however, there is also in both *Aerial View* and *Stations* the sense of a journey. In each of these films there are actual journeys which are both psychological and geographical—a journey into the self which is at the same time an actual journey within the specific spaces of Canada.

Furthermore, while MacGillivray works within narrative, there is as yet no privileged sense of a present tense in his films. In *Linda Joy*, for instance, Linda is "alive" in the last shot after we have heard an account of her death. So too, in *Aerial View* and *Stations*: while the films both have structurally a beginning, a middle and an end, this structure does not correspond to the narrative time of the film. It is not just that there are flash-backs or flash-forwards: the films' narrative strategies cannot be explained in this way. Basically, the films refuse any sense of an unfolding present tense.

Coupled to these strategies of temporal dislocation is a frequently imposed disjunction between image and sound. MacGillivray plays with the standard text-book practice of over-lap editing—introducing the sound for a new scene while the present scene is still on the screen; cutting away to a new scene while the present sound continues. In MacGillivray's hands, however, this practice is so extended that different bits of narrative information are presented simultaneously on the screen. This strategy also becomes part of the great reticence of these films: the films refuse to emphasize the climactic moments within their own drama. Instead, they cut away to another scene just as these moments are about to occur.

Finally—and this is stylistically perhaps the most interesting aspect of MacGillivray's work—there is in these films a self-reflexive concern with systems of representation. In *Aerial View*, there is an 8mm film within the 16mm format; in *Stations*, there are recurring television images within the space of the screen. It is as if MacGillivray wants to critique his own representational practice, his own use of cinema both to explore the self and to search for a present by recording the past.

*

Aerial View opens with a scene of Geoff and his son Sammy watching a home movie together. This Super 8 film shows Geoff, his friend Tom (Mike Jones), and Mary, Geoff's wife-to-be and Sammy's mother, all throwing about a kind of frisbee together. They are also making a movie of themselves. Except that the film we are watching is not really the film they

are making, since we see the characters on the screen filming one another.

As if to emphasize this confusion of the filmic with the real, MacGillivray cuts to a 16mm version of this Super 8 movie; so that for a moment, the secondary text becomes the primary text within the film. As he cuts back and forth from the 16mm version of this home movie (which gives it a sense of the present tense) to the Super 8 version (which confirms it in the past), we might notice that the sound of the projector is deliberately audible on the sound-track, while the film itself is ghostly in its silence. The apparatus of illusion-making is foregrounded in this way, while the illusion itself keeps changing status within the discourse of the film.

Meanwhile, something like a conventional story is being told. As they watch the footage, father and son, Sammy asks: "Where is Tom now, Daddy?" "I don't really know," replies Geoff. "Mummy looks happy," says Sammy. "I think she is," replies Geoff.

"Is" not "was." As in *Linda Joy*, there is in these two films a constant play between what is present and what has passed—in fact, a destabilization of the present in relation to the past.

Once we have seen this film, we could speculate that, in terms of narrative time—the chronology required for the story—this scene must occur very near the end. Yet it opens the film—in *media res*, in the classical sense; yet also in a way that distances and disrupts the spectator/spectacle relationship expected within film. We can respond to the human emotions represented in Bill MacGillivray's films, but we have to work on the place of the events within chronological time.

The film also opens with a declaration of a triple absence: missing is Tom—as we shall learn, an important guru figure in Geoff's life as an architectural student; and missing (we might assume from the scene with the two of them) is both Mummy and (we must assume from Sammy's question) Mummy's happiness. If this film is *about* something, it is about an investigation into the reason for these absences and into their eventual cost.

After this first scene (the domestic), we get another less personal scene (the professional). This second scene, however, is equally intricately designed.

We see over-head shots of some maps and charts—real-estate charts we might assume. Then an aerial view of a Nova Scotia coastline, over which the title appears, *Aerial View*. On the sound-track we hear what we might assume is the chopper sound of a helicopter; except that in the next shot, we are examining the coastline from the point-of-view of a motor-boat. Only then might we register that the chopper sounds of the first shot are really the sounds belonging to the next shot—the sounds of the boat.

For this "professional" scene, no faces are visible. But voices are heard. In the image, we are moving past a freighter, grounded on the rocks some months before. "Someone made a good buck there though," one of the voices says. And then a few moments later: "A great place for kids to grow up." We get strong sense in this scene of property being sold.

It would be tedious (and unnecessary) to go through the film in this degree of detail. It is enough to say that every scene is choreographed with the same attention to the signification potential within the very syntax of filmmaking.

This is not just "illusionist" practice, giving us the space and scale of specific locations within Nova Scotia. It is that—because it does give us this space and scale; at the same time, with every change of scene, it challenges the way that we relate sound to image and present to past.

On a more thematic level: Geoff is a young architect who, perhaps, through the influence of Tom, has been made more

idealistic than he might have been about the politics of architecture, about the *purpose* of architecture. At the opening of the narrative (which is not the opening of the film), Geoff is enjoying an assured success in his profession. But he is not much interested in this success. He is more interested in local housing, "using local materials and local skills," as he explains at one time to a classroom of students.

In fact, this classroom scene allows Geoff to present his manifesto—a manifesto that might not be that far removed from the manifesto of Bill MacGillivray. We have to build something that is of some *use* to people, not just something that will close deals, create cash flow, and allow a lot of rich people to make yet more money and which will keep the politics of civic exploitation in place. As Geoff talks about building his own house in the country with his own hands, about discovering skills within the process of that building which he never knew he had, about the beautiful view that he has from his window, one young girl cackles when he says that he doesn't have a television, and one boy, who had been reading some kind of merchandising magazine throughout Geoff's discussion, finally asks the determining question: "How much money do you guys make?" Geoff has no answer. Fortunately, at the moment of this question, the loud-speaker system asks him to move his car. He accepts this command as an excuse to leave the classroom. While the image stays on the class, on the embarrassed teacher, we hear the car drive away from the school.

Because of its mixture of the old and the new, Halifax is rich in architectural signifiers. In *Aerial View*, MacGillivray uses the city as Antonioni used Milan in *La Notte* or the EUR section of Rome in *L'Eclisse*.

A couple of sequences in this film are particularly reminiscent of Antonioni. There is one moment towards the beginning of the film when Geoff and his partner Ross are off to close some important architectural deal. As they go up in an elevator in the Maritime Centre, one of the new bank-based high-rises that have been erected in the south end of town, through the window in the elevator we can see the spire of St. Matthew's Anglican church being dwarfed and then lost as the elevator rises above it. Later, towards the end of the film, after Geoff has retired to the country and has lost both his wife and his job, Tom comes to visit, accompanied by a hitch-hiker. "We met on the road and we're friends for life," says Tom, with his Newfoundlander's friendliness, when they arrive.

A marvellous scene follows—like 7:30 A.M. was intended to be, a sequence shot—in which the hitch-hiker plays the mouth organ and Tom and Geoff drink a bottle of Screech, talk about Mary, and share the primordial Newfy knock-knock joke together.

It is the scene that follows, however, which is truly worthy of Antonioni. We see the three of them wandering about the rocky shore together the morning after their evening together. As so often in the Maritimes, the space is thick with fog. Tom and Geoff wander out onto the deck of the marooned freighter that we had seen at the opening of the film. Then Tom offers his confession. "The older I get," says Tom, "the more I realize that you gotta tow the line . . . You gotta play your part." Tom has joined the system. Through a friend of his father, he has become a civil servant. He has a nine-to-five job, pension benefits, the lot. He has sold out.

In close-up now, their faces wet with mist, Tom and Geoff exchange silent glances together. Then, for the end of the scene, MacGillivray cuts away to a long-shot of the two of them on the wreck, each posed at opposite ends of the deck, facing away from one another, each looking out through the mist at another section of the sea.

If *Aerial View* favors the idealism of a young male architect, it also critiques this idealism. Geoff's determination to be true to his own principles isolates him from his friends, alienates him from his wife, and leaves him alone in the country with the responsibility of looking after Sammy. By refusing the commercial world, he is also refusing what many people would call the real world.

The critique of Geoff's position is most strongly voiced by Mary, his wife. While arguably she is dramatically disfavored by the film—she is constantly smoking, she doesn't like Geoff's Newfy friends, she doesn't want to move to the country, she wants to have more money, and she doesn't seem to care a lot about Sammy—it is her voice that articulates the critique which we can infer from other aspects of the film.

This voice begins during a luncheon meeting with a friend in the new fashionable Chateau Halifax restaurant that looks over the city. But we can hear it over a number of scenes in the film, again defying any sense of chronological order, as at one time, the luncheon with her friend becomes a discussion with her friends, including Geoff.* While her character is unsympathetically presented in the film, Mary's *voice* describes quite sympathetically the total self-involvement that we see in Geoff.

Aerial View is a simple film in many ways. It tells a simple story, an old-fashioned story, a story of idealism and of defeat. In this way it might be related to *Linda Joy* that tells a similar kind of story. Yet in both films, as in *Stations*, it is the *structure* that universalizes the particular situation, as the particularities of the specific locations give warmth and a sense of reality to the whole.

At a number of key points in the film, MacGillivray returns to the Super 8 footage, as if in moments of self-reflection, as if part of Geoff's awareness of what he has lost. So for the end of the film, he returns to his aerial view.

We see Geoff's partner, Ross, in a four-seater, single-engine private plane. He is surveying the terrain of the coast, obviously looking for sites on which to build, as in the second sequence of the film. In fact, this might be the second sequence of the film! Ross would appear to be looking down on Geoff's house. But finally, he grows impatient. "Come on," he says to his pilot, "Let's get outta here. This is costing me money."

As the voice of commerce ends the film—an hour-long featurette—MacGillivray freezes the frame on this final aerial view of the location for his film, having moved in on the image as the sound moved away. Then the credits roll.

*

Although a very different film, *Stations* is organized in the same way. There is the same extended overlapping between image and sound and the same refusal to privilege a present tense. If Super 8 footage was part of both the structure and meaning in *Aerial View*, nagging Geoff about his past and about his loss of both Tom and Mary; in *Stations*, television monitors play a similar role but in a rather different way. While the video images too refer to the past, they also serve to question the value of their own acquisition and the way their meaning has been changed in the process of their own construction.

The central character in this film is called Tom Murphy, and this Tom too is played by Mike Jones. A one-time seminary student, he has espoused a secular life and become a television reporter, very much against the wishes of his father. But the

*I happen to know that the film was not conceived in this way. Nevertheless this device becomes part of the film's final structure.

real project he wants to undertake for television involves a personalised documentary that would explore the disorientation felt by some of his former colleagues at the seminary who have lost their calling, especially of his friend Harry who has been his friend for many years and who left the seminary at the same time as Tom. Harry's disorientation is far greater than Tom's. Harry has found no alternate position in life—not even a job, certainly not a woman. Tom, on the other hand, seems to have fallen into his job, has found a wife and started a family.

Essentially, *Stations* is about disorientation. The people that we see travelling across the surface of the land by Via Rail are mostly immigrants, leaving one section of Canada for another—looking for work, looking for meaning. There is a Québécois who has been working at the lumber-camps of British Columbia and who wants Tom to ask him why he does that. There is Brenda from Vancouver who is on her way to Toronto, hoping to find work. There are also other passengers, some from other countries, who are now travelling across the enormous space of Canada, returning to some little place they call their own.

Since the travellers who are searching for work are also searching for meaning, they are in this way like Harry who, since he left the seminary, has found no reason for doing anything and who has nothing to believe in.

The inner meaninglessness of Tom's own secular life is brought home to him when he receives news that Harry has committed suicide, a suicide that may have been precipitated by Tom's insistent questioning of him for his television show.

The scene of Harry's death is typical of the achievement of this film and is indicative of the way in which MacGillivray thinks cinema.

During the television interview with Harry that had occurred earlier in the film, Harry had tried to explain his grief. He no longer felt part of something greater than himself, he explained. He was no longer part of a larger whole. "I wasn't Father any more. I had to introduce myself as me." Losing his vocation was not for him just like a break-up of a marriage. "It was like ending a life," as he said.

Later, while Tom is editing this footage, we might notice that Harry's reference to death has been eliminated from Tom's assembly while other bits of information we didn't see in the interview sequence have been added. "Reality" is being manipulated for the sake of a good television show. Then the phone rings. Tom freezes the video image of Harry's distraught face; and we learn that Harry, indeed, has killed himself.

The exploitative side of image-making is further emphasized in this film by an encounter that Tom has with a drunken man who angrily resents Tom's superior position to all the people he is interviewing. He considers the whole process patronizing. "The big ones want to look at the little ones," he screams out about TV. Yet as Tom manages to placate him and coaxes him to let himself be filmed, he too declares the problems with his father. "I gotta message for my dad," he says to the camera. "I made a mistake."

Along with all the video footage in *Stations*, as in *Aerial View*, *Stations* also contains some home-movie, 16mm footage. This footage shows Tom—more correctly, Mike Jones—as a young man at the seminary, taking his vows, prostrating himself on the ground as required indication of his humility, greeting his father, sharing his pride in his holy life with his family and friends.

This footage was actually shot by Mike Jones' father and is "authentic" footage of Mike's own term at a seminary in his youth. For *Stations*, however, as for *Linda Joy*, MacGillivray

has re-worked this footage, making it ghostly through step-printing, making it unreal—as if a scarcely-recalled memory. However, since the "Tom" in this older footage is recognizably Mike Jones, this seminary footage bears an eerie, almost too-close relationship to the real. As in *Aerial View*, this criss-crossing between the "actual" and the "fictional" contests the representational practice endemic to film and the way we tend to validate the fictional with references to the real.

In *Stations*, however, both at the opening and at several points throughout the film, this "home-movie" footage serves to underline the loss that can be felt when such communal dedication is surrendered; and it serves to remind Tom both of the greater grief that such a surrender caused for his friend Harry and of the alienation from his father that Tom has felt ever since.

Again, in what at first glance seems an old-fashioned way, *Stations* is very much about the search for a father. Yet, while a reconciliation with Tom's real father is central to the plot of the film, it doesn't have that much to do with the story of the film as the film unfolds.

The story of the film seems more to consist of the many little anecdotes that all the people in the train share with Tom as he interviews them for this "human interest" film that he has been asked to make for a commercial station in Vancouver. Most of these anecdotes also involve a searching, as I have said—a searching for work, a searching for a place that might become home (or, as in the case of the immigrant travellers, that has become home, a searching for the relationship of self to the vast land over which they speed in their Via Rail train. In this way, all are concerned with a search for the meaning of their lives.

Some of these characters were scripted into the film. Some were found on the train. Some were a mixture of both—people who were found but who were then asked to talk about specific things. Brenda, the young woman with whom Tom attempts to have a fling, is particularly tough in talking about, from her point of view, both his pampered past and privileged present. Bernard, a porter in the train, is a political radical who wants to change the world, not just reflect its surfaces for some "human interest" television show.

Most compelling are the comments made by Robert Frank, the well-known American photographer and off-beat filmmaker who now has a home in Cape Breton. "Stories are boring," he begins by saying—a comment that might well relate to MacGillivray's refusal to create strong narratives for his films. Frank then talks with Tom about catching trains and missing them, about the elements in life that either make it dependable or which allow it to be exciting. But like all the other characters in this film, he talks about a sense of home—something which, with all his travelling, Robert Frank has never had.

"So home is when you get on the boat," he says to Tom, who has left his "human interest" film in Halifax and is now on his way to Newfoundland. With the idiomatic skills now of a true Maritimer, Frank can recognize that Tom is coming home "from away."

If *Stations* is more engaging through its number of little stories than through any dynamic plot, more through its sense of random encounters than through any compulsive narrative thrust, so these stories take place within the space of Canada but outside of time. The "present tense" of the film does not fully declare itself until two-thirds of the way through the film. The scenes that we witness, therefore—both the scenes on the train and the scenes at Tom's home on the West Coast with Holly, his wife, and Mark, his son—have neither a temporal nor a causal relationship to one another as the film unfolds in

time. We can *infer* these relationships, of course—but *after* we have seen the film. In the films of Bill MacGillivray, conventional narrative is always down-played. What happens *to* the characters is always less important than what happens *between* them.

The end of *Stations* involves an abrupt change of style. If all the narrative and temporal dislocations both parallel and underline the dislocations of the characters—not only the severe disorientation of Harry and in another way of Tom, but also of all the characters travelling across Canada in the train—the film ends securely in the present tense with Tom back in Newfoundland, re-united with his family and reconciled with his father. And after all the stylistic formality and self-questioning nature of the process of image production, the last scenes are more in the style of *cinéma-vérité*.

With Mike Jones' real father present on the screen and with MacGillivray's real father singing a lovely song, this collapse into the merely representational is arguably a weakness in the film, arguably an over-simplification of the issues that have been raised by the film. At the same time, in a way that is consonant with MacGillivray's cinematic thinking, this ending does resolve, both in style and in theme, the problem set by the film.

With Tom, his father, and his son being photographed by the tower on Signal Hill by Tom's wife, Holly, *Stations* very much celebrates the unification of the male dynasty by the close of this film. At the same time, in the scenes that involve her, Holly is stronger than Mary in *Aerial View*. She is granted more independence of spirit. She has her own work, and in some key scenes, she conveys a sense of what she has had to endure in her marriage to Tom—a man equally as self-pre-

occupied as Geoff was in *Aerial View*. Like Mary in this, however, she too doesn't seem to be too close to their son, Mark. With the exception of the most recent *Linda Joy*, MacGillivray's films enact the interests of a very male-centered world.

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However, all that might be changing. MacGillivray is well aware of the need to expand the horizons of the world that he depicts. *Linda Joy* acknowledges this awareness. And for his next film that he plans to shoot this autumn, he has for the first time a woman at the center of his work.

Life Classes tells the story (as the script synopsis puts it) of "an intelligent, strong-willed woman who has until now, lived a quiet sheltered life in a small village of rural Nova Scotia." Through a series of misadventures, Mary moves from a paint-by-numbers hobby to the recognized acclaim of an established artist.

Rich both in detail and in the diversification of character, the script promises a more extended palette than MacGillivray's previous work. Casting will be crucial; but those of us who know his work cannot help but look forward to the challenges of MacGillivray's next production.

With a government film policy that encourages the most exploitative of filmic enterprises—stuff to be placed between the ads on commercial TV—we cannot help but look forward to a new film from the Maritimes, to a new film that deploys local materials and local skills, that plants pictures in the mind of how we live. We cannot help but look forward to a new film by Bill MacGillivray.

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State Machismo

The Official Versions of the State of Male/Female Relations

by Joyce Mason

At Toronto's Festival of Festivals last fall (and at the Montreal Festival which preceded it) the National Film Board's feature docu-comedy *90 Days* proved to be one of the big press hits of the Canadian entries. During the Toronto festival, however, although the press was full of felicitations (and variations on surprise that something commercially viable and "funny" could come out of the NFB) no comparisons were made in these reviews to another humorous film—a mere 12 catalogue pages away—which was also about the crisis of male identity and culture (machismo) in a changing society, *Up to a Certain Point* (*Hasta Cierta Punto*, Cuba, 1983).

Up to a Certain Point, like *90 Days*, is a fiction feature film, drawing upon documentary techniques and traditions. Each film was produced by the state film agencies of their respective countries. Both filmmakers (Tomàs Gutierrez Alea and Giles Walker) had access to the means of production for a feature length comedy and, on the basis of their previous popular successes and for reasons of the economic structure of production in each country/institution, they had this without the necessity of presenting a completed shooting script for prior approval.

Both filmmakers are highly conscious of their role in the social dynamic of culture and society, and responsive to their perceived audiences. Both films have received positive endorsements from those audiences. The films are comedic. Both use irony and satire in approaching issues of social concern. In this article I will look, in the context of the above points, at the convergences and differences between these two films and the two cultures and political economies of which they are a part.

90 Days is a sequel to *The Masculine Mystique*. When production began, with a budget of \$488,000 from the NFB programming committee, *90 Days* consisted of a schedule of plot developments around which the non-professional actors would improvise dialogue.

Walker and Wilson (David Wilson shares the "Story" credit on the film) resurrected Sam Grana and Stefan Wodoslawsky from the original cast and drew up a fairly tight schedule of plot developments around which they would improvise dialogue.

"We took the film the way it naturally wanted to go. I think using non-actors was the key. You don't get that kind of gritty, natural performances from trained actors. And of course you can't get scripted performances out of non-actors.

"We just rode the waves. If something worked, we capitalized on it."

The Gazette, Montréal, Sept. 13/85

While the script of *Up to a Certain Point* was also developed in production, its plot is self-reflexive and actually follows the development of a script for a film about machismo.

"In this case, I simply had the idea. I worked with Carlos Tabio...on the screenplay, as well as Seafin Quinones, a relatively young writer. We outlined a plot and developed a few scenes, knowing that the script would change as we went about filming. The only thing that we had sketched out pretty clearly—sketched simply because that too became enriched day by day during the work of filming—was the love story between the scriptwriter and the worker, which is the other part of the plot...We always wrote out tentative dialogue and we always were changing it as we worked with the actors...We didn't impose a written dialogue on them, but rather we worked out the dialogue from the interviews we had done together, which we had discussed. The original screenplay has very little to do with the finished film. This is not an easy method of work and from the very start you know you're going to create a work that in a conventional sense will never be fully achieved. That is to say, it's going to be a work with defects and, perhaps, structural deficiencies here and there, but, in exchange for what?...in exchange for achieving a certain ingenuousness and freshness that it gives you to discover something and express it in that moment.

Interview with Alea, Senel Paz,
Areito vol. X No. 37 (1984)

When I attended a screening of *Up to a Certain Point* at Lehman College in the Bronx, one of the professors from Latin America and Caribbean Studies expressed his amazement and delight at the relationship between documentary/research and structured fiction—the intelligence and responsiveness of the script. "Can you imagine someone saying in Hollywood 'Well, we'll take some equipment to the docks and start shooting and write/develop the script as we go along.' They'd never get away with it! And yet, it's so good, so very well done."

It was the way of making the film, the system for producing culture amongst all of the film's content, which spoke most immediately to this man's sense of cultural difference. And oddly enough, it was a similar dramatic filmmaking technique (for which there is a long tradition at the National Film Board) which was cited over and over again in newspaper reviews as the marvelous innovation of *90 Days*. This wonder and interest expressed about this aspect of both films is worth noting. It is amazement that a film can be both pleasurable and not Hollywood...that somehow the old LA producers adage "Give them what they want" spoken from another location results in the audience receiving something unexpected. To pleasure is added delight.

These responses, both of the Canadian press to *90 Days* and of the American Press (and this professor) to *Up to a Certain Point*, were surprising to me. My habit of watching un-Hollywood film and political-fiction-on-a-shoe-string had perhaps made me blasé about this particular approach to fiction filmmaking. I am nevertheless interested in the nuances and the relative skill and intelligence which each filmmaker used in manipulating these techniques.



90 Days—Blue (Stefan Wodoslawsky) left, Alex (Sam Grana) right. One fantasy infantile, the other adolescent.

In spite of protestation that *90 Days* has “a solidly plotted story that quite nicely keeps the blight of an issue off the fictional landscape,”² the social issue documentary turned fiction film has a long tradition at the NFB as a means of slipping filmmakers’ feature film aspirations through the approval process. And both films are made, though with varying degrees of accomplishment, from a location of social responsibility and service. Though in the case of *Aléa*, added to these is an ability to engage the intellectual capacities and political interest of his audience. But both filmmakers take seriously the aspect of their occupations which is to entertain.

The key to *90 Days* success is undoubtedly in this desire to entertain and to please an audience. Many reasonably progressive people have told me that they liked this film. They find the characters or the situation not so much horrifying as amusing (I found it simultaneously pathetic and horrifying). The film’s own publicity lays claim on the reading that we are meant to take: “A warm and off-beat comedy, this story can’t fail to entertain. Rich in observation of modern social mores, it takes a good swipe at today’s battered male egos.”

But the male ego is more stroked than swiped at in this plot and though the characters are far from heroic (or even attractive) they are portrayed in a sympathetic manner. As for the “observation of modern social mores,” one might wonder at the customs and conventions of Anglophone heterosexuality at the Montreal NFB. For indeed, far from the conventional battle-of-the-sexes plot situations, we are offered scenarios of which most Canadians have had no personal experience. Instead, in response to the threat of women’s perceived demands, we are flown away to a “return of the repressed fantasy” world.

Although they are unlikely to identify with the *situations*, audiences may recognise (and even identify with) the awkwardness of the character’s interactions, the non-intellectual,

non-analytical, bumbling self-absorption of the two male leads. But the characters’ lack of self-knowledge is not due to a lack of self-consciousness; and, from its privileged outside view, the audience may find this funny. But Alex and Blue, like most of their audience, don’t really care *why* they’re lonely or unhappy they just want *it* to change. They desire the magical event that will transform their lives—reordering the universe with them at the center. And the fantasy world of the cinema provides this.

In *Up to a Certain Point*, on the other hand, the plot is firmly rooted in the plausible. The characters are placed in a social and economic context.³ The problems of machismo are not isolated in a single location—be it, heterosexual romantic relationships, the workplace, the proletariat, the intellectuals, marriage, etc. Rather, it is interwoven and interrelated through all aspects of the culture and economy. The central character is the scriptwriter, Oscar (played by Oscar Alvarez) who in the course of video interviews and research at the docks pursues his infatuation with Lina (Mirta Ibarra), a single mother and an articulate worker. The two main narrative threads follow this romance and the development of a film-script. The development of the script is depicted as a set of social and sociable relations...the director and writer are friends, the writer’s wife is to play the role which is based on the character of Lina, the dockworkers discuss their work and their private lives in front of video crews and in conversation with the writer and sometimes the director, and the writer and Lina (the model for his main character) have an affair.

Narrative developments and conventions of the script-within-the-film are referred to and disputed by the characters and we are given evidence of how people’s lives are shaped by the culturally prescribed conventions which have shaped their imaginations.

Intercut between the lovers’ first embrace and their conver-

sation in a bedroom (Lina stands at the window, Oscar lies in bed), is a sequence in which Oscar considers the ending of his script: a shot of a jet rising heavily and steadily from a runway, and moving away into the sky, as Oscar, in voice-over says, "It ends with a plane aloft." This grouping of scenes begins with a close-up of a bowl of ice, a tape deck and two glasses; as Lina scoops ice into their glasses, the Basque song plays: "If I could cut her wings then she'd be mine; but she couldn't fly, and what I love is the bird." and the scene plays out a romantic and physical tension that is resolved in their embrace and their movement together out of the frame. CUT. He considers the ending for the film/has written the ending to this affair. CUT. Standing at the window, Lina says: "I'll go to Santiago." Oscar, still lying in bed, responds, "If I asked you to say?" "In this room, with my kid?" There is no response.

What is evident in this sequence, and it is reinforced at other points in the film, is the writer's power to dictate the outcome. Just before this, Lina had told Carlos that she doesn't like sad endings and that she thinks the film should have a happier ending than his play had—she wanted the woman to have her work *and* a good man. But Lina is not in charge of the script. He has entered her world (the dockyards and her home) and he has drawn out information about her past and her aspirations. Her world is raw material for his manipulation and interpretation, while she learns of his world only by inference and oblique reference and has no power to reshape it in her own image.

This does not mean that she is not critical and astute, or that she is powerless; but rather, delineates a much more circumscribed area of power. Her challenges to his presumptions are acute: in response to his assertion that the dockyards were notoriously macho, she points out that: "Machismo is pretty much the same everywhere; and, by the way, why aren't there any women on the film crew?" And later, when he refers to an actress (his wife) playing her in the film, she points out, ironically, "Not me, your character."

But the power that she has is defined by her function. Our first image of her is as she speaks very forcefully at a union meeting about working and safety conditions. Her speech meets with applause which is intercut with applause for the play which Carlos has written—drawing both a parallel and a distinction between their respective roles as 'voices' for a community and the relationship of that role to their 'work.'

Work and people's attitudes toward it, play an integral role in the structure of the film. Throughout the narrative, head and shoulder shots of dockworkers being interviewed are inserted. They provide a counterpoint to, or an underlining of, the narrative and they situate events in a material and economic context. The film director wants to make a film about machismo—a single issue, in a single context. But the screenwriter, through glimpses of his own machismo and through his emotional relationship with Lina, begins to assert that both machismo and the lives of the dock workers are too complex to file under one issue or one bad attitude. As Enrique Fernandez pointed out in his review of the film, "Machismo is a social evil, not a personal sin."⁴

The differences and similarities in production approaches with regard to questions of character, script development and audience, etc. are I believe reflective of the different positions of filmmakers and their filmmaking institutions within their respective countries and societies.

In North American popular belief, individual self-expression (whether in the form of 'entertainment' or of 'art') and social responsibility are perceived as contradictory. This is reflected in Ackerman's comments regarding the blight of an issue on the fictional landscape, and in the filmmaker's own

unresolved statements:

There's still a strong suggestion in Walker's conversation that fiction is a lie, and somehow suspect.

That happy ending, he says shaking his head, "I had mixed feelings about it..."

"People who saw the early scenes said, 'Oh, Hyang-Sook is so wonderful. Don't you dare have things turn out badly.'" And members of the Korean community impressed upon us what a terrible thing it would be if an engaged woman went back home jilted. Her life would be over."

So they decided to ride the wave. "People seemed to enjoy the film so we felt we had to be consistent with that feeling."

Pause.

"I'm sure the film wouldn't be a hit if it wasn't enjoyable."

"90 Days is an exception to the NFB rule,"

Marianne Ackerman, *The Gazette*,
Montréal, Sept. 13/85

A film production project described as having begun with a list of "social issues" and a desire to pioneer an alternative to conventional drama has ended with the desire to please.

The NFB is mandated by parliament to interpret Canada to Canadians through film. But it is a public that is largely unknown and a relationship that is rarely analysed. The regional production studios are in a relatively better position to interact with and respond to that mandate. But the threatened position of the NFB on a Conservative agenda of budget cuts and privatisation, doesn't leave much room for the blossoming of regional drama production.

Though the rationale of authenticity is offered in relation to using non-actors in *90 Days*, at the bottom line it is less a true choice than a reflection of fiscal restraint. Sam Grana (character name Alex) and Stephan Wodoslawsky (Blue) are on staff at the NFB, as is Daisy de Bellefeuille (who plays Blue's mother). Furthermore, *90 Days* is a sequel to *The Masculine Mystique* and the circumstances under which that film was produced seem analagous to the qualities of the film itself. Employed but without meaningful work (due to lack of funds) english language film production staff within the Montreal National Film Board, isolated from the community they are intended to serve, with equipment and film stock but no place to go, turn the cameras in on themselves.⁵

The issue of machismo was dealt with in *Up to a Certain Point* in terms of social and economic relations. Our perspective and sympathies shift during the development of its narrative: in the initially appealing, sensitive, if flawed, protagonist we begin to recognize a selfish, philandering liar who masks his self-interest in romanticism. Such a scenario would certainly not be specific to Cuba, but it is reasonable to assert that it is the ideological commitment of the filmmaker to an ongoing struggle for change in his society which draws him to examine the ideological underpinnings of machismo's appeal—of which romanticism is certainly one.

As Enrique Fernandez has pointed out,

the game for Alea (is) identification and alienation, the legacy of two great theorists of materialist aesthetics: Eisenstein and Brecht. Since the cinema can do either just as readily, Alea chooses to do both. He is the great poet of cinema dialectics. Yet how different...from that other master of the self-conscious, materialist cinema, Jean-Luc Godard...Alea...makes films in which life always threatens to spill over the boundaries of form. It is, therefore, possible to believe in Alea's ideological position as a place for human beings other than theoreticians.

"Razzing the Bureaucracy", Enrique Fernandez
Village Voice, March 26/85

In *90 Days*, on the other hand, a resolution is offered to what in the real world could be described as a conflict of interest between the sexes. And the resolutions (tongue in cheek or not) to the emotional/sexual problems of these two heterosexual English Montrealers are delivered quite simply through the enactment of their respective fantasies. One fantasy is infantile (Blue), the other adolescent (Alex).

But perhaps most interesting as a cultural point of comparison is that in the depicted fantasies of *90 Days*, the search for satisfaction is irrevocably enmeshed with commodification. Although each character attempts to re-humanise, to emotionalize the transactions being made, the culture in which they exist is one which encourages isolation and then commodifies the possibility of re-connecting. Blue picks his bride-to-be from a catalogue of Korean women looking for North American husbands. His protestation that "I don't think she is a mail order bride, but someone that I fell in love with through the mail over a long period of time." stands in contradiction to his embarrassment that anyone would know that she is coming or why. It is also evident in his own culturally prescribed need to ignore the economic transactional significance of marriage as an institution by romanticising his relationship to it.

The previous film, in which Blue explains his intense need to please women (whether they want to be pleased or not), is enlightening in this respect: he said, that as he was growing up his father never lifted a finger to do anything around the house, and how unhappy and overworked his mother was; and that he decided that he would know how to make a woman happy—by simply being the opposite of his father. And in *90 Days*, his new, completely dependent bride-to-be is indeed 'made to order' for this fantasy of replacing the father as provider and lover, delivering the 'mother' from her less desirable situation. Of course when, after his mother's visit, Hyang-Sook appears in a dress and hairstyle which reminds him too closely of mom his insensitive dismissal of her pleasure in her appearance is a classic moment of aggressive denial of the oedipal conflict.

Blue's story is the central one of *90 Days*. He wants the ideal woman, by which he really means a woman that he can create in his own image. Blue says to Hyang-Sook, while walking through the park, that the reason he hesitates to marry her is that they haven't slept together yet and might not be compatible. She responds "But I'm healthy." (This is the "compatibility" line, so often referred to as the funniest point in the film.) What he is saying is that he wants control—wants to retain the power to reject if not satisfied.

That it is not a question of desire, passion or love, but of power and transaction becomes explicit when Hyang-Sook, after learning that he has made love to a previous fiancée decides that she must make love with him in order to hold a position of at least equal privilege (or rights to marriage) as the previous woman, and he refuses.

Alex' fantasy, on the other hand, has to do with being the phallus itself; being the object of desire—the sought after. A woman approaches him, in a bar, on behalf of another woman who wants his sperm. Though this is the logical outcome of his philandering 'cock-sure' self image, he is baffled by the direct business-like approach. He attempts to transform it—in his own imagination, to romanticise it: "I think maybe that something could develop here...I know it sounds weird, but you know...I think she's interested in me...you know, why would she approach me?"

In both fantasies, what has been commodified and is being serviced, from differing directions, is the notion of male power and potency, itself.

The happy ending (the wedding) in *90 Days*, although a

direct attempt to accommodate the filmmaker's perception of the audience's desire, is in the final analysis perhaps no more of a romantic cliché than *Up to a Certain Point*'s final freeze frame of a bird in flight. But, in Alea's film the *shaping* of the ending is revealed in the dialogue and structure of the film. Possible and opposing endings are proposed by the characters of Lina and of Carlos. Whatever the ending, something of its nature has been exposed: that it is chosen, decided upon. The ending of the film is therefore both arbitrary (either would do the job of closing the narrative) and dictated (in the existing inequality of social relations Carlos is dominant).

It is ultimately, in this aspect of their films and their approaches that I find the core of a difference in sensibility. Alea's intellectual engagement with his subjects, with his medium, with his social and political context enriches his emotional commitment to his characters. He also enjoys the relative security of the ICAIC (The Cuban Film Institute)—it is after all unlikely to be privatised and its government has no interest in courting the Hollywood studios into transforming the streets of Havana into the all American town.

In comparison, the context for feature film production in Canada is ideologically and critically impoverished, economically and culturally contradictory and psychologically complicated (a confusion of inferiority, impotence, bravado, sublimation and service). To produce a feature entertainment film within the often threatened and maligned NFB inevitably draws either attacks or the back-handed compliments of aberration. The assumed inferiority, in our American-colonised culture, regarding state-subsidised work is the first hurdle of inferiority which filmmakers must approach. The conception that a subject of social relevance makes boring cinema is the next. Commercial viability as the ultimate signifier of worth is another—the longstanding idea that we will only really be good when we can make it in the States.

It is this state of cultural colonisation and political confusion that may account, in part, for the failure of *90 Days*—a failure both at the levels of conception and of conviction. The context in which work can be produced discourages intellectual engagement, on the one hand, as elitist; and dramatic/character revelation, on the other hand, for reasons of financial restraint (Non-professional performances may be gritty, as Walker claims; however, they are also restrained and careful). Starting with a social issue of great importance—an upheaval in gender roles and in sexual relations—which effects every aspect of our lives, Walker, like his actors, has taken few risks.

In *90 Days* he has neatly narrowed his character focus to two men (rather than *Masculine Mystique*'s four) and wisely abandoned the "consciousness raising" sequences of *MM* that exposed these characters as completely and cloyingly pre-conscious. The comic element of *90 Days* is in the eccentricity of the individual and the oddity of the situations. The ironic distance is in the degree to which these characters and their experiences deviate from the audience's notions of masculinity and of romantic pursuit. The audience and the filmmaker laugh not at the character's contradictions (both Alex and Blue have, in *90 Days*, become completely consistent) but at the characters as contradictions of society's norms. That they are exaggerations of their society's tendencies seems less the point. The humour of the film is dependent largely on the audience's sense of the silly and the inappropriate.

Both on its own terms and by comparison *Up to a Certain Point* offers a film which is at once humorous, critical, poignant, ironic and engaged. This is simultaneously a result of the man and of his context. His theoretical engagement and political commitment are evident in his films but echoed by his words: both through his book, *Dialéctica del Espectador* and



Up to a Certain Point—Discussing narrative closure: Her world is raw material for his manipulation.

through statements to the press such as, "I agree with the revolution. I'm not going to question it because I'm not interested in doing that. Now, *within* the revolution there are things that I know can be improved, that are not right, and I'm interested in revealing these things. But this is criticism meant to improve things, not destroy them."⁶

The political context of the NFB and the cultural/social context of Canada is hardly likely to nourish such a 'sensibilité engagée'. However, whether at the NFB or the ICAIC, a personal commitment to engage with the subject at hand is, for me, the essential requirement in a filmmaker. And Walker, seems to have sloughed off this commitment in favour of fantasy and escape.

All this is not to say that Alea has delivered to us the long-awaited "male feminist" film. His comments on equality in relationships (in his interview with Senel Paz⁷) draw on a romantic vision of freedom which, though projected onto the woman, is at root a masculinist fantasy. It may offer to end male *possession* of women; but it does nothing to take on the responsibility of a new dynamic of equal relationship. But perhaps because of his aesthetic commitment to dialectical forms in producing film, his own contradictions and "sacred bulls"⁸ are both apparant and critically vulnerable in his films.

Still the dialectic between entertainment and social responsibility reaches beyond the borders of capitalist democracies and their cultural institutions; and Alea has not managed to escape the question of the quest for 'pure' entertainment either:

Is there room in Cuba for films that don't posit a revolutionary line, don't critique revolutionary contradictions, don't bother with politics at all, but simply entertain? Alea,

one of the world's most successful politically committed filmmakers, thinks so. "I'm tempted to make one," he says, "just to show that it can be done."

"Razzing the Bureaucracy," Enrique Fernandez, *Village Voice*, March 26/85

It seems that the *temptation* of purism can be found in any production unit as in any revolution; though I hope, in the case of pure entertainment, that Alea will resist.

NOTES:

1. *Up to a Certain Point* has no distributor in Canada and has therefore not received a commercial release.
2. "90 Days is an exception to the NFB rule," Marianne Ackerman, *The Gazette*, Montreal, September 1985.
3. In contrast, in *90 Days* we are never told what Alex or Blue do for a living. I was surprised when reading reviews at references to Blue as an office worker. I realised then, that even in the previous *Masculine Mystique*, there had been no clear indication that these were a bunch of salaried film production people with no budget to go on location or to pay actors—turning back to themselves for material and thus drawing on their own isolated resources.
4. "Proper Conduct," Enrique Fernandez, *The Village Voice*, March 19, 1985.
5. For my comments in this regard I am indebted to Peter Harcourt, who shared his insights regarding *The Masculine Mystique* with me during the Festival of Festivals in 1984. I found his ideas infinitely more interesting than the film itself and use them here as a point for comparison with *Hasta Cierta Punto*.
6. "Razzing the Bureaucracy," *The Village Voice*, March 26, 1985.
7. *Arieto* vol. X, no. 37 (1984): "If you really love someone, you love her for what she is, not for what you impose on her . . . it is just the opposite of a *macho*-ist relationship. It is precisely a relationship that is based on a situation of freedom, not on subjection, and of participation of the two people at the same level. I think that that gives us the key to many things in the film because, as I say, it also goes well beyond the man-woman relation."
8. Sacred Bulls are the sacred cows of macho culture and fantasy.

A Criticism of Defence (for Gertrude Stein)

by Phillip Corrigan

With Andrew Britton's 'In Defence of Criticism' (*cineACTION!* 3/4, 1986) we have a familiar cinematic pattern: some Monster (or some lack) is specifically constructed in an early framing and the rest of the movie works to provide relief/sustenance. Like such dominant ideotopes he supplies a hidden pedagogy, the comforting and comfortable pedagogic voice of authority that will put 'us' right, explain (and, of course, forgive) 'our' mistakes and set us walking properly again, after drying the tears that his "criticism" had actually occasioned.

It is full of those *observations without an observer* which Paul Valéry so effectively criticised all those years ago (before film!). Unlike Valéry, Andrew (who rarely appears as an I/Eye) glissades through the objectivist language and that easy retreat of any authoritarian, the 'one' (e.g. 'one feels...'). But, as the very theoretical, political, and embodying differences which he finds so undigestible have shown, behind this innocuous 'everyone knows' (and which 'one' does he have in mind, I wonder?) there is the petty pedagogy of authority claims and with it, like the onrushing silencing, comes a host of selecting practices. That is to say, Andrew takes (or better, *makes*) a series of imaginary personae from some easy elements of a very diffused project and then, chomping loudly, devours the bricks his straw has made and believes therefore that the Walls of this Theoretical Jericho must surely come tumbling down.

I read his work waiting for a hint, a suggestion, an implication, a touch of that sentimental embodiment without which any writing today (for me, I give away my terms here quite openly) has to be recognised for what it is: a species of that fascism which is so extensive. Like Peter Fuller¹ there is the slovenly implied appeal to authority figures (principally those of men and the holy God of aesthetics) and an equally meretricious

cont'd on p. 51

MEIN POINT OF VIEW

Born Again, or: Uncle Philip's Great Big Inflatable Ego Machine

by Andrew Britton

"I AM HE WHO ACHES WITH AMOROUS LOVE. What do you make of that? I AM HE WHO ACHES. First generalization. First uncomfortable universalization. WITH AMOROUS LOVE! Oh, God! Better a bellyache. A bellyache is at least specific. But the ACHE OF AMOROUS LOVE!"

D.H. Lawrence on Whitman.

Uncle Philip is terribly cross with me, and he says he's going to stand me in the corner for a very long time.

"Fascism for me, as for others, begins with a contempt for other people's happiness".

Well, who'd have thought it? A slap on the wrist from Uncle Philip.

Truth to tell, although Uncle Philip always takes care to mention the others, I think what he really means is himself. "... feminism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism and the celebration of differencing, sexualized subjectivities ...". Did you ever? What a carry-on! All those big words just to say ME!

Even Gertrude Stein is Uncle Philip, really. Whenever he gets angry with me

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A Criticism of Defence

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selection which can announce, in the calm voice of any priesthood, that some special 'we' are in a time which he designs as 'not a creative period': 'it would be difficult to come up with even a handful (that grab and run masculinist emphasis is really quite contagious) of films from the current year which are even of minor interest' (p.5). I liked that, Andrew, 'even of minor interest' a nice Oxbridge touch, gently balanced, like—gosh, there is not even a minor-minor elective to place in the teacherly desire syndrome here, a tiny trace to glorify and incorporate to curriculum.

So I thought 'what is going on here.' Well we have 'a defence of criticism' and so it says, but what is there to be defensive about? for? against? What is the practical work which is being refused and, equally important, what is that theoretical defence (as in psychoanalytic 'resistance') which is being announced here? Different collectives have lived through the last ten or fifteen (or 50) years with a certain discovering, an embodied re-cognition, which precisely and theoretically indicates a need to go beyond resistance and resisting (oh so suitable for the bright boys and their tiny, inconsequential evasions) to *refusing*. And in that refusing there is a special, for so the spiral turns, a special precious, and yes, sentimental, founding, a collectivising in that "gentle apocalypse" of affirmation.²

That is to say we (differently to be sure, and this is festive!) are Into Textuality, we are timing and spacing our words. Films, Andrew, are not in fact *texts*. Does this need in 1986 to be said? Films are constructed (rather than recording) traces of a field of possibilities, an image-repertoire: they are visual constructions with added traces of the speech, musical and noise tracks. They are multiple in their resourcefulness for meaning. You see, Andrew, what your straw people construction of the last 'theoretical years' hides, and it must have been your intention because like me, and also as a masculine subjectivity, you lived it, is the enormous "coming out" of a million differential collectivised recognitions who say, and they are far from polite in this saying: 'We shall define ourselves.' That is very happy making for me and would have been impossible without a project which recognised that there is no meaning 'in' films (or any other cultural productions) rather there are resources there for making meaningful. That is, to be direct: the audience has come alive in its wondrous differencing.

The avant-garde is rather various and is not to be named by you or by me, rather what is to be asked of any cultural practice including that special form called writing-criticism which is (if it is not simply to annotate the holy of the aesthetic and revive authority) the affirmation of love and solidarity—it is a moral question: in what way does this social form enable, empower the celebration and connectivity of difference in that form of 'making hope practical'³ which I believe to be doing difference differently. Film (along with 2,567 other cultural forms) is one of the ways in which feminism, anti-racism, anti-imperialism and the celebration of differencing sexualised subjectivities, has made a polyphony of making sense/sensibilities, theories and pleasures, dreams and becomings, through which different collectivities are now more assured. The glissade (alas not quite as enchanting as Robbe-Grillet's *glissatifs positifs* nor as subversive of working class racist masculinity) of Andrew's bibliographic footnote number one would be of interest were it not for (1) its almost entirely masculine authority (2) its elision of the semi-fascism of Perry Anderson's recent glitz slow plodding after Dad (*In the tracks of historical materialism*—one of the most odious books I have read for many years⁴) with the patriarchal messianism of Edward Thompson or the more sturdy, but not less exclusivist, politics of Fred Jameson. Throughout the text I waited for a hint, a trace, that in the last fifteen or twenty years films might have been made, audiences might have been pleasurably informed (as Brecht would have it), discussion might have been enabled, by feminism, sexual politics, anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist politics in relation to different film practices.

Instead we are offered the return to the safe male world of *criticism*.⁵ Well we know that world, differently, as a series of differentiating prisons, all of them tied to disadvantage, until the prisoners, blinking against the light, agree to the vocabulary and the standards of the boss-class and their insistence that cultural productions already have an inscribed meaning and their equally violent reduction of all cultural experience to that of *reading of the text*. No hint here of the problems with social/differenced literacy, or with textuality as a dance and play amongst the significations.

What is precious to me is that revolution which still defines the two crucial progressive questions (but, of course, for each collectivity differently): What is necessary? What is possible? To do work which might assist in people's coming to

their own sense of their own embodiment and consciousness and spirit and being-in-the-world (and starting—where else, Andrew?—from the premise that in order to have more people have to become more by their own self-transformation and that of the circumstances which constrain, silence or exclude them) we have to begin by dismantling the cultural control booths which have for centuries denied experience in favour of the claim that within the selective tradition there is also a set of authorised interpretations—what "the work" means. This seems, in my dancing, evasiveness, away from another Doxa, to be where we are now. What is necessary? What is possible? Well I for one might go, sentimentally, with a politics of feeling good.⁶ Or is that to be greeted with the snort of derision as the authorised representative of all those figures in dominance reaches for the Critical Bible and pronounces a series of anathema? Fascism for me, as for others, begins with a contempt for other people's happiness. Like in 1968 we do not have to suddenly make 'good', 'political', oppositional or progressive films, but we have to make different films differently. Otherwise, loop the reels and let's settle back in our chairs whilst Sir tells us why it's good and what it means.

NOTES

- * Philip Corrigan teaches at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. He is a writer who lives in Toronto. The background arguments for this response can be found in: 'What is the subject of (a) cultural production?' Undercut 3/4 1982; his chapter in J. Curran and V. Porter (eds) *British Film History* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1983); 'Information' Photo-communique Fall 1985; 'Did I hear bark?' C Magazine December 1985; 'I am the no-body who fills.' Vanguard April 1986; A. Kuhn *Women's pictures* (London, Boston, Routledge, 1982); *The power of the image* (London, Boston, Routledge, 1985); K. Silverman *The subject of semiotics* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1983); M. Barrett, P. Corrigan, A. Kuhn, J. Wolff (eds) *Ideology and cultural production* (London, Croom Helm, 1979); J. Wolff *The social production of art* (Macmillan, 1981); M. Barrett *Women's Oppression today* (London, New Left Books, 1982) and through the journals *Screen*, *Persistence of Vision*, *AfterImage* (England) and *Representations*.
- 1 P. Corrigan 'Against biological aesthetics' *Banff Letters*, Spring 1983; 'Fuller's Earth' *Vanguard*, Spring 1984
 - 2 P. Corrigan 'Doing mythologies' *Borderlines* (1) 1984; 'Into textuality timing our words' *Sociological Review*, November 1983; 'Towards a celebration of difference(s)' in D. Robins and others (eds) *Rethinking social inequality* (London, Gower Press, 1982); and D. Sayer 'How the law rules' in B. Fryer and others (eds) *Law, State, Society* (London, Croom Helm, 1981); (ed) *Capitalism, State Formation and Marxist theory* (London, Quartet, 1980)
 - 3 R. Williams *Towards 2000* (London, Chatto, 1983) Cf P. Corrigan in *Borderlines* (1) 1984; R. Williams *Politics and letters* (London, New Left Books, 1978) Cf P. Corrigan in *Media Culture and Society*, 1, 1979
 - 4 In some future moment I hope to collaborate with Lorna Weir on a long review essay of this regressive, repressive book
 - 5 Is it still necessary to suggest that 'art, literature, criticism are terms of bourgeois specialization and control' as Raymond Williams indicated in 1975 ('Notes on the sociology of culture' *Sociology*, 10, 1976). If anyone thinks the masculinist emphasis misplaced see: R. Wellek *A history of modern criticism*, vols 5 and 6 (New Haven, Yale, 1986) and Alicia Ostriker 'American poetry, now shaped by women' *New York Times Review of Books* 9 March 1986
 - 6 P. Corrigan 'The Politics of feeling good' in *Popular Cultures and Political Practices* (Toronto, Garamond, 1986); J. Berland, 'Contradicting media' *Borderlines* (1) 1984; 'Sound, image and the media' *Parachute* (41) 1986; E. Bloch *The Principle of Hope* 3 volumes (Oxford, New York, Blackwell, 1986); R. Dyer 'Entertainment as Utopia' *Movie*, 1978; D. Hobson *Crossroads* (London, New York, Toronto, Methuen, 1982); T. Modilewski *Loving with a vengeance* (London, New York, Toronto, Methuen, 1982); H. Foster 'For a concept of the political in art' *Art in America*, April 1984

Born Again

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for being a bad boy he always uses that name, just to remind me that his consciousness has been raised. "For Gertrude Stein". Isn't that gorgeous? I'm sure she'd be grateful, if she were alive. A few years ago Uncle Philip built himself a great big noisy steam engine with "Love and Solidarity" painted on the side. I call it his ego machine, and sometimes he drives it so fast that I think he's going to kill somebody.

"WONDEROUS DIFFERENCING"
HONK! HONK! HONK!
"GENTLE APOCALYPSE OF AFFIRMATION!"
CHUFF! CHUFF! CHUFF!
"A MILLION DIFFERENTIAL COLLECTIVISED RECOGNITIONS!"
VROOM! VROOM! VROOM!
"I AM WHO HE ACHES WITH AMOROUS LOVE!"
BANG! BANG! BANG!

I always know when Uncle Philip is having a gentle apocalypse of affirmation because a funny glint comes into his eye, and he starts hitting me and accusing me of all sorts of things. Once he said that I wanted to stop him dancing and playing amongst the significations. I was in for it then, I can tell you.

Frankly, as far as I'm concerned, he can dance til he drops.

Sometimes Uncle Philip goes into a kind of trance in front of a mirror, murmuring "Wondrous differencing!" over and over again. I am always glad when this happens, as I have a chance to slip out and go dancing myself. I know that one day Uncle Philip is going to find out that I'm a faggot and that I like to dance in gay discos. This will make him angrier than ever, because he thinks that all men are fascists: whenever he wants to be abrasive, he accuses you of being masculine.

Odd really, because he sometimes looks quite masculine himself, especially when he's wearing his Gertrude Stein hat.

Uncle Philip dances among the significations the way some people dance at discos.

Look at me, what great buns!

Look at me, what a sensitive soul!

"GENTLE APOCALYPSE OF AFFIRMATION!"

Shake that ass, Uncle Philip!

"HAPPY-MAKING DIFFERENTIAL

COLLECTIVISED RECOGNITIONS!"
Happy-making! Isn't that adorable?
"RACIST WORKING-CLASS MASCULINITY!"

A little less sensitive this, perhaps; but any stroke in a just cause, and Uncle Philip is a blue-eyed little darling, all dressed up to meet the angels.

"RACIST WORKING-CLASS MASCULINITY!"

Two slaps on the wrist, 40,000 lines, a detention and a week's loss of privileges for working-class men!

How shall we manage it? So many bad little boys to be chastised!

Peter Fuller, Edward Thompson, Perry Anderson . . . even a gentle tap of admonishment to hard-working Fred Jameson, who can still only manage a C+.

So many little wrists to be slapped! So many little childish bottoms to be spanked!

OW! OW! PLEASE DON'T, UNCLE PHILIP!

"LOVE AND SOLIDARITY!" growls Uncle Philip. SPANK! SPANK! SPANK! And what about the little girls, Uncle Philip?

At the mention of the little girls Uncle Philip becomes sensitive again, and has a gentle apocalypse of affirmation.

"THE ETERNAL FEMINE LEADS US ONWARD!"

The little girls have all been so good that they can tidy up their desks and go home, with a lollipop from Uncle Philip.

"LADIES, LOLLIPOPS AND LIQUOR—ICE ALLSORTS ALL AROUND!"

And a whole box of sweeties for Gertrude Stein (who is actually otherwise engaged with Alice B. Toklas, and isn't disposed to be interested in Uncle Philip's liquorice allsorts).

"THE ETERNAL FEMINE LEADS US (AND MORE PARTICULARLY, ME) ONWARD!"

Up to heaven in the ego machine!

WHEEEEE! LOOK AT ME!

VROOM! VROOM! VROOM!

HONK! HONK! HONK!

CHUFF! CHUFF! CHUFF!

Exit, in apotheosis, Uncle Philip, shaking the classiest little ass in Toronto and distributing free copies of his bibliography.

Uncle Philip sings almost as well as he dances. His party-piece, which he performs with a grandeur befitting Beethoven, is the prisoners' chorus from *Fidelio*, though curiously enough he seems to be under the impression that it is a solo number. He always says 'we', of course, but it tends to come out sounding like 'I'—a fact which I derive from his conviction that there is no meaning 'in'

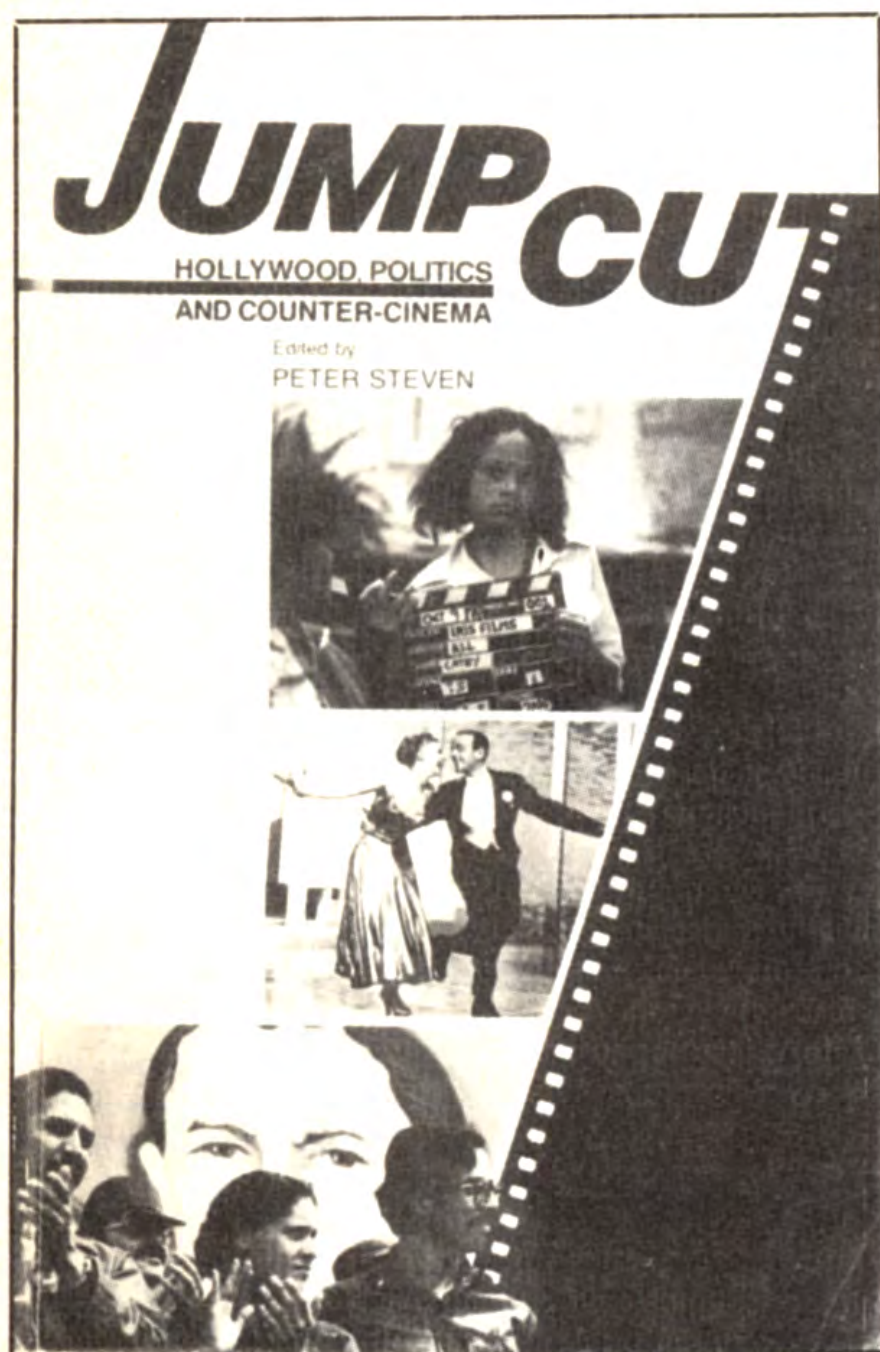
works of art until they have the good fortune to encounter him. I am cast as the villainous Don Alzaro. On these occasions, Uncle Philip becomes more than usually dyspeptic and fantastical, and imagines that I wish to shut him up forever in the male world of criticism and throw away the key. Naturally, he would prefer to light out for the territory, honking on his horn and coming alive in his wondrous differencing. Once, when he was insisting with particular stridency that it was the aim of my life to prevent him from defining himself, I was so rash as to reply that the sooner he defined himself the better, for whether or not he found the effort worth his while it would at least get him out of my hair. My reward was a clip around the ear, and the observation that this was exactly the kind of caddish remark that was to be expected from a Cambridge boy.

One day I hope to summon up the nerve to say to Uncle Philip that I would prefer it, on the whole, if he did not project his fantasies of bondage and liberation either onto criticism or onto me, and that if he is really interested in the "enormous coming out" of different collectivities which he envisions in his more Olympian moods, he would be well advised to trade in his steam engine for some other form of transport. If I am feeling really brave I will add that while I am, of course, in principle, happy that he is happy, it is impossible for me to take the degree of interest in his personal experience that he, perhaps, would think appropriate.

POINT OF VIEW
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B O O K S

Political Criticism, Hollywood and Oppositional Film



by Scott Forsyth

Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema
edited by Peter Steven
Between the Lines, 1985
400 pages; \$14.95

This collection of material from the left-wing American film magazine provides a fair picture of a decade of political criticism, politically motivated film-making and some sense of the ongoing development of a specialized practice of film studies.

Jump Cut is rightly celebrating more than 10 years as a major forum for political film criticism and a significant organizing tool for independent film-making in North America. The material compiled includes criticism of spe-

cific films, historic reportage, discussions with viewers and film-makers, advice on teaching and political work; the projected audience includes film-makers, teachers, students and activists. Like the magazine, the collection wants to be partisan, informative and entertaining while addressing serious political and theoretical issues. Like all collections, it gives the reader the particular pleasure of browsing—skipping from piece to piece—snapping one's attention from subject to subject. (Of course, given the Godardian inspiration of the title, such jumps will doubtless lead us through disorientation to new connections.)

The New Left on the New Left

A review of a collection encourages a certain impressionism, but the nature of the material also demands a political response, at least in a codified fashion. Peter Steven, who works in independent film distribution in Toronto, provides an introduction which strikes the expected tones of consensus and congratulation and also presents the context and history of the magazine. *Jump Cut* is proudly situated within the American New Left of the 60s and 70s, "the Movement" as Steven puts it. I suppose this aggressively cheery rhetoric is a combative response to media derogation of those political and cultural rebellions we all remember as formative of contemporary politics. More objectionably, Steven sets up one of those invidious dichotomies which valorize one term at its 'opposite's' expense. Under New Left we find the still glowing 60s, flowering pluralism, movement politics; under Old Left, the forgotten 30s, Party line orthodoxy, old-fashioned class politics. Any necessary criticism of Stalinism is undercut by the righteous self-presentation. At the level of political practice the schema ignores the degree to which those infamously 'spontaneous' movements involved, were sometimes led by and even revived the organizations of the Old Left—Communists, Trotskyists and the obvious New/Old synthesis of Maoism. More broadly, to invoke the passing conjuncture of the New Left without clear-sighted criticism of its failures of programme and organization is astonishing naiveté. Far from grounds for optimism, the New Left's trajectory was the dissipation of a mass base, the integration of its politics into liberalism when clear class and anti-imperialist lines were not drawn, the reduction of its networks of activists and intellectuals. Media jibes about the turn to psychotherapy, 'radical' lifestyles and jogging are not entirely without truth. We're in a downturn in radical politics; the sectoral movements which persist are variously integrated and isolated with some political and organizational consolidation. Sentimental evocations can only confuse leftists in perceiving the limitations of movement politics. (One of the articles by John Hess, is considerably more perceptive on the 60s.)

Fortunately, *Jump Cut* in practice is much better than this; indeed, the vitality of left cultural criticism and film production which it exemplifies is one of the crucial areas of consolidated strength. Steven also notes a consistent class line in the writing which complements the emphasis on gender, sexuality and ethnicity raised by the movements. As well, *Jump Cut* has done important historical work in addressing the cultural politics of '30s Communists and a good example on the Workers Film and Photo League is included in the book.

On behalf of the magazine, Steven offers some valid

self-criticisms. Some writers are charged with a tendency to reduce art to the social and ideological and a hostility to the dominant cinema which ignores the pleasure for a mass audience and denies autonomy to the aesthetic. (As a long-time reader I would have liked to see one of those 'Cut, slash—Aha! sexist/racist ideology!' articles one more time.) Predictably he blames this on residual Old Leftism. We are used to left cultural criticism ritualistically dismissing Socialist Realism, but Steven's repetitiveness on this point starts to feel like a concession to the hostile anti-communist culture we live in. (I won't dwell on the 'logic' which allows a simultaneous fond remembrance for a different wing of Stalinism and its manoeuvres in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.) Soviet aesthetics is a bureaucratically distorted part of a tradition of Marxist sociology of art which dates back to Plekhanov in the 19th century. It is a tradition frequently charged with social and ideological reductionism, but still not without a coherence and power worth debating. Indeed, all of the film movements the collection celebrates have utilized more naive variants of sociological criticism and invoked 'realism' against Hollywood in the development of effective ideologies of film practice. This is not exactly rigorous self-criticism.

Just when I was calming down, Steven turns to what he calls Marxist aesthetics. He surely intends to be brief, but the version of this tradition is so truncated and idiosyncratic that a response is required. The schema he offers is quite original; Marxists writing on art divide into the 'greats' (Brecht, Lukacs and Sartre make it) who are iconoclastic and utopian, the Soviet-model critics who are respectable and the Soviet-model hacks who are not. Guess which group our New Lefties want to emulate? Steven wishes aesthetics to mean merely response to specific texts and that response will either deploy the base/superstructure model of classic Marxism or move to diversity, flexibility, etc. This myopic focus can be objected to in detail; for instance, Brecht and Lukacs (and followers like Goldmann) have a complicated relationship to both the Soviet model and the Marxist sociology I've mentioned above. Or what about Marcuse, the star of the New Left's selective appropriation of Marxism, who rejects the base/superstructure model and is still hostile and reductionist to popular media? More important, this 'aesthetics' needs to be placed within Marxism's sustained debate on culture and politics. The potential of Marxist cultural criticism is bound up with varied theoretical debates: the re-defining of ideology and class consciousness begun by Lenin and Lukacs, re-situated by Althusser and his followers and opponents; the attempt to comprehend class hegemony and culture in Gramsci; the intriguing, if largely failed efforts of Reich, Marcuse and Althusser to deepen a radical view of subjectivity in a synthesis with Freudianism. Even the more locally aesthetic work such as the delineation of mass culture and culture industries by the Frankfurt theorists or the superb debates on Realism and Modernism amongst Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno have involved comprehending the nature of present capitalism and the possibilities of transformation. To be more positive, Steven does appreciate the necessity of incorporating Marxist politics and theory into the left-wing cultural project.

Perhaps I'm being a little hard on this Introduction, but *Jump Cut's* attention to serious Marxist issues, is not prominently in evidence in this collection.¹ This is apparently due to the broad audience imagined and to Steven's

healthy populist ambivalence about 'theory.' On the one hand, we are in the midst of a resurgence of Marxist theory in politics, philosophy, economics, sociology and cultural studies. It is a reason for optimism but, on the other hand, in a difficult period for radical politics, such scholarship is open to academic domestication—nowhere more evidently than in the attainment by film and cultural studies of a niche amongst the 'disciplines,' and a certain hierarchical fetishization of theoretical language which attends such institutionalization. (It's probably worth emphasizing that the language of down-to-earth, pragmatic politics is no guarantor of 'correctness' either.)

Leaving aside disputes about the Introduction's (the magazine's?) sense of history and theory, readers, when they get to the collection, will find themselves engaged politically and theoretically—as film-makers, teachers, viewers.



Shirley Temple

Once more with feeling!—Hollywood

Most radical film criticism begins with Hollywood, even if only negatively. Steven contends that the magazine has grown more sophisticated in its comprehension of the mass pleasures of dominant film and this small selection seems to bear that out. Charles Eckert on Shirley Temple is original in theoretical approach and exceptionally entertaining in its deployment of promotional material, contemporary political and economic discourse and details of films. Dan Rubey persuasively tracks the contradictions within *Star Wars'* combination of spectacle, technology and ideological recuperation. Somewhat startlingly, he concludes with an indictment of big technology from the point of view of limits-to-growth, soft-technology reformism. Wasn't I just talking about the New Left's political limpness—how about communes, Dan? Chuck Kleinhans stakes out an exemplary stance on entertainment and working class audiences in a discussion of working class film heroes. Jane Feuer opens up musicals for serious discussion and then closes the case with a particularly dour 'structuralist' politics which compares unfavorably to other important work on musicals.²

The brevity of the section does not allow any consideration of some key questions for radicals reacting to popular culture—what does such analysis mean for radical film practice? Does it lead to formal or ideological prescriptions? How can sophisticated comprehension of media texts and mass pleasures contribute to mass politics? Of course, some questions may seem intractable, short of seizure of the means of production.

The Movements make the Movies

The bulk of the collection is devoted to oppositional cinema, and this seems justifiable in promoting awareness and confidence amongst the film-making constituencies, and given the considerable literature available on Hollywood. As it has throughout the century, oppositional film usually means documentary film for reasons of politics, organization and economics.

Most of the material is historical reportage and assessments of the practical difficulties of left film-making. There are particularly good over-views of Newsreel and Third World Newsreel, black American films, and the overall state of independent, documentary work in the United States. A good political look is taken at *Union Maids*, which also raises issues of the Old Left. The Quebec/Canadian film, *A Wives' Tale*, receives particular attention to process. Steven notes the problem that much of the writing simply documents rather than engaging critically or theoretically, but that is a persistent limitation in documentary film history.³

The only disappointing section is devoted to 'Women's Counter-Cinema.' Since feminist film criticism and film-making are so developed and specialized, and since *Jump Cut* has always been in the forefront of these developments, it is surprising that the selection is brief, theoretically uneven, and considers no women's films in detail.

Ruby Rich provides a good over-view of feminist criticism and films, but it will appear somewhat cursory and dated to most readers. She does introduce key film-makers like Ackerman, Rainer and Meszaros, who have continued to be important for feminists. Her 'naming' of modes of women's film is engagingly democratic and non-prescriptive, although the names smack of preciousness. Two debates on 'positive images' and Shirley MacLaine as star are conceptually banal and politically tepid in relation to any recent writing on identification and appropriation of images and stars. (Presumably such inclusions are due to the editor's archival function, but I think we can be spared them.) Julia Lesage has an arresting analysis of *Broken Blossoms*, the kind of revisionism that has been crucial to radical film criticism. That's all. *Jump Cut*'s record on women and film is much better.

The section on Gay and Lesbian Cinema modestly and intelligently lays out some political and conceptual groundwork for expanding cultural politics commensurate with the importance of the gay and lesbian movements. Richard Dyer on gays in film and Becker, Citron, Lesage and Rich on lesbians and film offer exhilarating manifesto-style overviews which entwine personal positions and stake out a distinctive politics about culture. This section highlights the need for left self-criticism on gay issues, but also points to the importance of audience appropriation in any cultural politics.



The Other Francisco (Dir: Sergio Giral, Cuba)

The final section on 'Radical Third World Cinema' is in several ways the most impressive. Julianne Burton and Tom Waugh discuss 25 years of Cuban cinema and the particular contribution of Joris Ivens as a committed internationalist. These articles make great reading and we can feel the impressive accomplishments of a national and communist film culture, despite the effects of colonialism and bureaucratic deficiencies. Teshome Gabriel looks closely and formally at Sembene's *Xala*, a film which confronts the central contradiction of class within the national liberation of a Third World country.

At this point, I'd read about women's, gay, lesbian, black and national cultures (and I was looking in vain for proletarian culture) and it struck me that there is a confusion repeated between what is useful in developing an oppositional ideology in practice and a fixing of distinct cultures as a political concept.

As concepts these need more thought and argument about whether in expressing the politics of a particular oppressed grouping they also appeal to a kind of essentialism about gender, ethnicity, sexuality which valorizes sectoral experiences and attendant reformism, and which can lead to dead-end isolation in movement politics. Presumably this is the kind of debate *Jump Cut*'s class line can take on, although it is not taken up here. Maybe that Old Left debate on proletarian culture can serve as a model of considerable rigor and sophistication.

It is also worth commenting on what seems to me a successful strategy of including interviews, exchanges, advice on teaching and political work. Some of these are mundane or obvious (for example, the editors promising to be more sensitive on gay issues) but several times valuable insights emerge on production, distribution, and consumption of left-wing films. Julia Lesage's powerful concluding article on Central America sets out the tactics of utilizing film in political work and highlights what is likely to remain a crucial arena of imperial confrontation with world revolution.

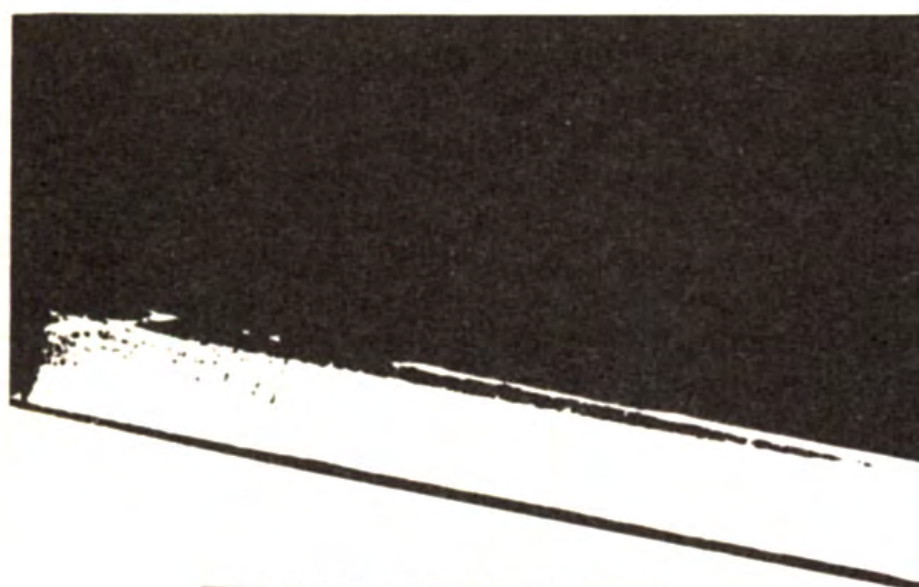
Some major omissions should be noted: there is very little of the magazine's considerable writing on European films and almost nothing on experimental film, so it seems that little attention is paid to controversial debates about radical modernism, although a second volume is hinted at.

Perhaps the strongest impression from the book is the feeling that leftist cultural work is developing a certain ideological coherence and an alternative organization of production and distribution. Sometimes this seems to involve foregrounding the educational over the aesthetic; some distance from the collection's beginnings with Hollywood's popular pleasures and ideologies. But this disjunction is not really absolute. Ultimately, radical cultural politics poses the re-appropriation, if not re-definition, of pleasure and popularity.

The collection delivers what the magazine delivers—a sense of diverse directions in political criticism and invaluable information on the range of current oppositional film-making. Obviously I find some limitations, but any political experience should be frustrating as well as engaging, and few books are political experiences at all. Despite its namesake in the technique of disconnection, radical spectators will doubtless sense a coherence and connection amongst the politics and practices represented, and that is both reassuring and challenging.

FOOTNOTES

1. Some very good material from *Jump Cut* is in another recent collection, *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, edited by Bill Nichols, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985.
2. See Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia" in *Genre: The Musical*, edited by Rick Altman, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
3. For an effort to correct this limitation, see Bill Nichols, "The Voices of Documentary" in *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, and Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981.



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Above: *Sans Soleil*



gene hackman in arthur penn's 'target'